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A smell of brimstone and a taste of joy

SEA DOG STORY

BY MARY TURNER

THE little grocer who used to bring deliveries on his bicycle had gone broke. An old sailor must put up with what he can't change, so now Commander Tenby went with his shopping basket to the supermarket which he hated, still after all these years walking as though dry land felt a bit strange to his feet. Sometimes at heel and sometimes not, Brutus snuffed from lamp-post to garden hedge and back again; off-white above and an indecent pink beneath, a gross old bull-terrier, chopping his teeth at little dogs and not seeing big ones if he could help it. Mrs. Kemp's chihuahua went off into screaming hysterics at the sight of him.

"Hush, Teeny! The little darling gets so excited when he meets other doggies—such a friendly little chap!"

She'd got Commander Tenby cornered now, between her front gate and the bus-stop; she'd been lurking to catch him for weeks. "Such a coincidence seeing you! I was just thinking, I only said to my husband this morning, we *must* get Commander Tenby to come to our bridge evenings. First and third Thursdays—"

"Very kind of you, I'm sure, but I don't play bridge."

Such a charming old man, she gushed to herself. Of course you couldn't have asked him when that dreadful wife of his was alive, quite impossible; but now—

"Oh, we have lots of beginners, I'm certain you'd pick it up in no time. You sailors are so clever!"

"I can *play* bridge all right. It's just that I don't like it. Can't bear it, you know; very boring game."

As he went his way, calling Brutus from some dainty that the road sweeper had overlooked, he congratulated himself. That was the way with these old biddies—be tactful but firm, otherwise he'd find himself at all their tea-fights and bazaars, even amateur theatricals as like as not.

He'd always been modestly proud of his tact, from the days in the Service when he'd maintained a steady course of saying

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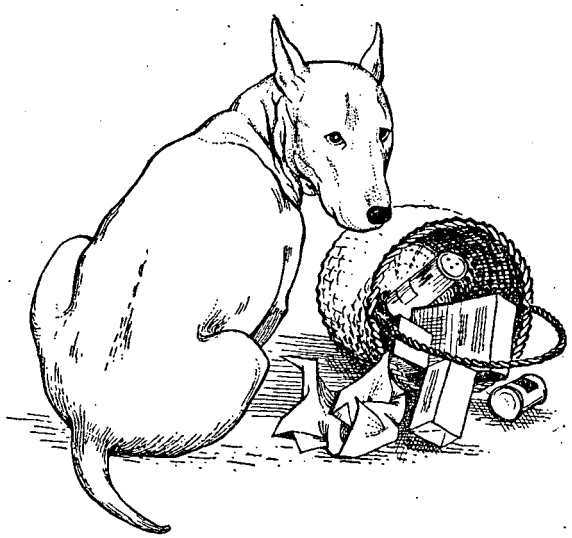
what he thought, speaking as he found, and treading right on any toes that lay in the path. If you're good enough at your job, you can possibly get away with that sort of thing, and he might well have done so, for he was a splendid sailor; if only he hadn't been married to Doreen. If she'd tried—a thing she never did—she couldn't have sabotaged his career quicker; she was indiscreet, pettily quarrelsome, an incompetent hostess, an embarrassing guest, the death of any party she attended.

Nobody ever knew what he thought about it, or if he thought about it at all, and here he'd been all these long years, axed from the Service, spending his steadfast strength in a narrow circle of daily routine; walking these tideless pavements, still in the arid suburban roads watching with his pale sea-blue eyes the changes of the wind and the promise of the clouds, going home to his cramped villa to write them daily in his log book.

His garden was snugged down for the winter now, as right and tight as if he was ready to sail it round the Horn. He rolled up the path and unlocked his front door. When they were inside, he made Brutus wipe his feet, leg by leg, on the mat, and Brutus groaned aloud, leg by leg, at the tedium and indignity of it. Once released, he hung around with his slit eyes covertly watching the shopping basket, calculating; there was liver in it—perhaps for a moment it might be unwatched.



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Everything in the house was orderly and shining. It was easy now to keep it so, but even when Doreen was alive he had managed, by what efforts nobody could imagine. Then she would trail in and out a hundred times a day, all grey tangles, teacup slopping; cigarette ash down her front, eyes like punctured poached eggs on a great plate of self-pitying white face, and a rich cloud of stale sherry fumes all about her. Stubby and uncomplaining through all her endless complaints, he'd tidied and tidied the mess downstairs and the even worse mess upstairs where she had drawers full to overflowing with clothes, out-of-order, out-of-date, odd, holed stockings, mutilated corsets, bits of scarf, the grubby hoard that she misered and gloated over.

It was all clean for good now, all empty, and the years of his lusty strength were thrown out with the old rags; the years of the blighted career, the pitying looks and the vinegar remarks of the other Naval wives; the long years of his retirement, nurse-maiding her as a perpetual unattractive child, lending ear to her grizzling voice, bearing her reproaches for the desert of loneliness that she had created all round them. In all those years he'd gone nowhere, made nothing, only endured. Now he was old, and all the roads were closed to him . . .

When the doorbell rang Brutus ignored it, so it was obviously a stranger. He always barked like mad at regular trustworthy people like the postman and the paper boy and the milkman.

There was a young man on the doorstep.

"Good morning—Commander Tenby? I am informed that you have reason for complaint."

Now no longer required to fight his country's enemies, the old man had for years kept his battling abilities fresh with his own domestic foes. They included everyone who supplied him with light, heat, bread, pillowcases, indeed everyone to whom he paid money. When he bought a pair of sheets, he observed the size specified on the label and at once measured them, lest they should be an eighth of an inch under size; when he received his electricity bill, he checked in a notebook where he recorded the meter readings. He wrote tirelessly, in reproof and remonstration, never accepting a brush-off, keeping neat files of every letter that passed between him and those who had done him wrong. In his mind he always had a clear picture of the present state of the campaign, so he knew now that this young man must come from the television hire company, his most recent adversaries.

He took him straight into the sitting-room where the set stared from its corner.

The young man laid a thick ledger on the table. It opened

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of itself and the pages riffled over and lay wide. He wore some pansy sort of uniform, the Commander noted, in a colour fluctuating between black and midnight-blue. He was very tall and had black eyebrows meeting in the middle which gave him rather the look of a swan in a temper—just the type who'd make trouble in any ship, thought Commander Tenby. But before he could fire his opening shot, the young man said very obligingly, "The Authority is aware that you have never received the service to which you are entitled. They are voluntarily prepared to offer you an alternative."

"Typical modern extravagance. I should have thought they would have made some attempt to improve the present set before swapping it."

"The set? Oh, I see," said the young man, smiling in a patronising way. "Yes, I can use it to show you what I mean."

He raised his arm. There was certainly something very odd about his uniform—as if it grew, like bird's feathers. He pointed a finger of light at the screen and it answered with a dancing luminous curtain that reminded Commander Tenby of the aurora in freezing northern seas.

"You see—not giving a proper picture at all."

"No? Look again."

Brutus wasn't stupid where his interests were concerned. He knew at once that his time of opportunity was come. Rising on his hindlegs, with lips delicately retracted, he closed his front teeth on the butcher's parcel and withdrew it from the basket. The liver went down his swallow in three snatching gulps.

The first thing that happened when Commander Tenby looked back at the screen was a feeling in the soles of his feet. He knew at once; it was the crunching, squeaking feel of wet sand. And then there was sound—summer waves exploding gently on rocks, and the hush of their recession . . .

And now the picture opened before his eyes, yet he stood not outside but just inside the circular frame of the view. Behind him the path and the stream ran in and out through the wood, between clumps of freckled monkey-musk flowers; in front the cove slept between the headlands, and the tide swelled and sank round the black barnacled fangs of the Carrack Luz. It was his home. Here he was born and grew up, and here he had once thought to spend his old time; rest and presently die in the place where he belonged. Doreen had soon squashed that idea. "Live in Cornwall? Why not live in the cemetery and have done? There's nothing to do there, no life. Where would I buy my clothes? I'd go mad with boredom."

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The young man was somewhere behind him, he supposed, because he could hear his voice. "The Authority is offering you this alternative programme. You are invited to inspect; if you are satisfied, permanent adjustment may be arranged."

And now Commander Tenby realised another thing. He took a step forward on the shore that had been his home fifty years ago and the feet that carried him were the feet of a young man. He had put down the burden, the knotty veins, the springless joints, the shrinking compass of the senses; now he felt life well up in him invulnerable, immortal, as it had been when he was twenty and had never met the slow encroachments of death.

"You will remember this day," said the young man, but not as a question.

"Of course I remember." Only it wasn't remembering, it was happening all anew.

"You're on leave at home—on your way to play tennis at the Cromptons'. You mean to go up the path over the headland."

"Of course. And I'll be late if you keep me here gassing about nothing, so if you don't mind I'll get on."

"What happens when you do get on?"

It hadn't happened yet, but he knew; his mind ran in and out between past and future.

He would go this side of the big dry rock and up the slippery grass of the path, never looking back because in this baking summer the adders dreamed in the sun and were apt to wake up cross if you put your feet down carelessly. He would cut across the head of the next bay and come to the Cromptons' big house where there would be the usual crowd of young people—and among them, waiting for him, as the parasite's egg waits on a grass-stalk to be devoured by its host, would be Doreen.

He'd taken her in as dumbly as a grazing bullock. At first because he'd never met anyone who played tennis worse; he'd been fascinated by the boiled-elastic limpness of her forehand—backhands she didn't attempt—and by the way she ran as though she were struggling through treacle. To his rather slow intelligence, it was all the essence of appeal, of adorable fragility. Before he knew it, she'd fixed her parasite's teeth in him and there she fed; brainless, gutless, developing into nothing, taking for ever and never giving.

"Right," said the young man. "Now try the other way. Go this side of the rock instead."

"I shan't get there in time if I do."

"You aren't in time at all at the moment. Go on."

Round the other side of the rock lay a scatter of clothes, as if

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the owner couldn't wait to stand still while she undressed, so longing was she for the water. They were absurd clothes, but not to his twenty-year-old mind in that long-ago day.

A striped tie, like a man's, in awful maroon and yellow. A navy-blue cotton tunic, pleats much crumpled, and its navy-blue braid girdle. A white cotton blouse, long-sleeved, gathered bulgily into elastic at the waist. A pair of all-defying navy-blue cotton knickers. Long black lisle stockings very badly darned at the toes with black cotton that had faded greenish.

He looked at them with tender indulgence.

"I know whose those'll be. Maggie Penhale's. She's still at school, of course."

"On the contrary. She left school today. She's eighteen; look up." And when he looked, she might never have been that nice little kid he'd known all her life, she seemed as though she'd been born that minute, full grown, in the Cornish surf.

Girls in those days wore rather a lot of bathing-dress. Hers was a modest affair of navy-blue cotton stockinet, with a round neck, fitting rather floppily, but to his eyes she was naked loveliness itself. Her hair was loose, still kinked from the school plait, dark, gold-lit, living. When she bent, standing in the first small waves, to throw water over herself, it ran silver over her copper skin and he fancied that she was made from the Cornish earth itself, the loveliest metals of its secret mines. She threw herself forwards and down to swim with flashing strokes, strong and gay as an otter.

He could feel life flowing from her presence, a wild fierce joy that called to him to share . . .

"You are only standing on the edge of the picture still," said the young man. "If you walk down to the sea and call to her, you will find that you have gone back to the beginning. You understand?"

"You mean I shall have a different life? With her?"

"Can you doubt how different? She is everything you ever needed. With her you will find yourself. Just walk right into the picture—it's all you have to do, surely you'll find it easy enough," he said, with an indulgent laugh. "Think of love, happiness, success; think of your children growing up round you. Just a few steps on this sand and it's all yours."

"Right," said Commander Tenby. "I'm not one to hang around all day before I make up my mind. I'll do it. Come along, Brutus." Brutus waddled in from the kitchen, all fawning hypocrisy now that his theft had gone unnoticed.

"One moment," said the young man. "You aren't thinking that you can take this—er—animal?"

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"Well, I'm not leaving him behind."

The young man's voice sharpened. His uniform, or whatever it was, began to glow with a rather alarming intensity and he'd become much taller. The Commander, who was short and a bit bent in the back, had quite a job to crane up and see his face.

"The offer of an alternative is for you only. The Authority is not concerned with animals."

"Don't be ridiculous. Who d'you think's going to look after old Brutus if I go and leave him?"

With half an eye Commander Tenby was watching the girl coming up out of the sea. Her face was grave and happy; it waited for his voice, he knew, to break into a smile of welcome.

The young man, in a voice that echoed horribly about the ceiling, said, "What does it matter—a disgusting old creature like this! Do you realise that you are risking not only a new life but also the retribution of the Authority?"

The room was full of something that reminded Commander Tenby of an electrical storm in the China Sea.

"Old Brutus is mine and I'm responsible for him," he said stoutly. To be honest, he never had liked Brutus much; he'd been Doreen's dog and she'd spoilt him from a puppy; he was a thief and a coward and he smelt awful; but he wasn't going off and leaving the old nuisance alone in the world. The idea!

"If I go, Brutus goes," he said. "And if he doesn't go, I don't go either, and you can tell your old Authority what they can do with their trick television, by God, you can!" he added, surprising himself, for he much deprecated coarseness of speech.

He had a last tiny sight of the picture in the television set; it showed him a view of himself starting up the headland path to go to his tennis-party and meet Doreen. And then he didn't see how the young man went, but there was a horrible smell of sulphur and the room was full of black, black feathers, drifting all over the place, somehow dead-looking.

Brutus snuffled them and got some in his mouth and they made him sick—of course, on the carpet. Commander Tenby bent his rheumatic old knees to clear up the mess, patient and painstaking as ever.

Afterwards he sat at his desk, and with the scratchy dip-pen he favoured he wrote:

Dear Sirs,

With reference to my complaint of the 12th ult. as to your television set, I must draw to your attention . . .

Brutus, with many luxurious grunts, got himself into a position where he could scratch with his hind-foot at the loose rolls of his pink stomach.

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He did everything slick as a whistle . . .

IF I TELL A LIE

BY KARL PENSOM

"IT'S murder," said Ricky disgustedly.

"Suicide, you mean," I said reasonably. "You don't have to stand up there making a fool of yourself. There must be easier ways of earning a living."

The fact is there are, but Ricky wouldn't touch them with a bargepole. He's a grafter—part actor, part impresario, and very much salesman—one of that select band of workers who tour the markets and exhibitions of this country, demonstrating and selling those wonderful household gadgets which the housewife uses once, and then throws into a kitchen drawer to rust. At present he was offering the LITTLE WONDANIFE: *peels*, *cuts*, *grates*, *chips*, *cores*, *slices: a* MUST *for every* HOUSEWIFE, and for the past hour he'd been demonstrating to two grubby kids and a supercilious-looking dog.

"Murder," repeated Ricky. "It's murder for a grafter . . . of a grafter, by a grafter. And I'll tell you something too." He paused heavily. "You can't always be sure what's murder and what's suicide in this game. There was a worker once up and cut his throat in front of a crowd of fifty people at the Brighter Bungalows show in London ten year ago."

"On the joint, with a pitch of fifty punters!" I yelled. "Do me a favour, Ricky, pull the other one."

"Straight up, I tell you," said Ricky earnestly, "on my little daughter's life . . .

"Johnny Royston was a gentleman grafter. Clean collar, clean cuffs, plummy voice, and kept his joint like a palace. He was the best worker with a knife in the game, bar none, and a smashing tool he had too . . . like a kitchen carver, with a long steel blade, only it was wavy ground all along one edge, and sliced like a razor.

He used to have twenty-foot frontage, with photos of him selling his knife to Royalty, Dukes and Duchesses—huge great

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three-by-four enlargements—all over a white shining counter you could have ate a meal off.

" And then he always had a flash polone on the joint handing out gear to the punters—never above twenty-five, and never the same face and figure two shows running. Out of work model girls and dancers, he hired. Johnny's women were a real eyeful, and the boys got a kick out of passing the time of day with ' Mrs. Royston '—a new one pretty well every week.

" One day—at the Brighter Bungalows, it was—he turns up with a skirt nearer fifty than forty, with a face like the back of a forty-nine bus. The boys soon found a name for her. Keep Death off the Roads, they called her. She was just like that female with a black hat and horse face they used to have on the road safety posters—and she never cracked a smile nor passed the time of day with anyone. We Mrs. Royston-ed her with one eye on Johnny to see how he took it.

" Well, before long he comes over to me, asks me to lay off the heavy stuff with her, like, because, says he, *this time it's the real McCoy*—straight, I tell you. May I drop dead this moment if this lovely boy hadn't gone and married—years before, it must have been—one of the original brides of Frankenstein. For geld, for money, I suppose. We soon saw the way of it. Old lady Royston—Ma Death, we called her for short—never made much of herself, but she must have cottoned to Johnny just before this show—we'd never seen her before—and catch him so much as giving the eye to another woman, there she was melting up to his elbow like a spook and leading him back to the joint. So Johnny didn't do much but work that show.

" Mind you, he was a lovely worker, like I said, so I daresay Ma Death had the right of it. He'd draw a crowd from nowhere, at the quietest time, and keep them spellbound with his spiel. No good grafter ever takes his eyes off the punters—quickest way to lose 'em—and he did everything slick as a whistle, ipes, pipes, and tiddlywipes, as the saying is, without once looking at the counter. He'd slice a tomato, new-baked bread, cabbage, meat—that knife went right through bone like it was butter—and even carve a bit out of a laminated plywood board, then cut a tomato again to show the knife hadn't been blunted. His hand would go straight out to the thing he wanted, like he had eyes in his chin.

" Of course, it was the Missus' job to put everything in the right place, so's he could find it straight off.

" I remember he had one flaming barney once—the only time he dared raise his voice to her—because it could have been dangerous, what had happened. He had a second knife there, an ordinary one, which he'd blunted up against an iron railing so

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Karl Pensom, author of *If I Tell a Lie*, was a young schoolmaster who taught modern languages at Malory School, Kent. A talented linguist and musician, he spoke French, German, Russian, Spanish, Italian, and Dutch, besides playing eleven different instruments. Until his tragically early and unexpected death it was not known that he was also a writer . . . His father found this lively story among his papers and sent it to us.

he could show how useless it was. Lovely line of patter with it, too.

" ' Look at this! ' he'd say, ' so blunt it won't cut pussy. Cut me throat if I tell a lie! '—and, bing! he'd draw that knife across his throat from ear to ear and, of course, nothing'd happen. Went over big with the punters, though. They loved it. The reason he got so steamed up that time was that he'd picked up the wrong knife—the sharp one—and that was very strange.

" Of course, he dropped it like a hot poker. Maybe he suddenly thought of all the lies he'd told his Missus. But he knew, without looking, he'd got hold of the wrong one: part of his spiel was to hand one of the sharp knives to a punter, ' 'Ere y'are, feel the weight; only three an' 'alf ounces.' The blunt one was heavy as lead for contrast.

" After that, I started watching. I'd seen him getting very friendly with some young polone that morning while old Ma Death watched from round a corner. There was only one way he could have pulled a boner like that, and that was if the Missus had switched the knives.

" But surely he tumbled? " I asked. " She wouldn't try the same trick twice, now would she? "

" Too right she wouldn't," said Ricky, " but if you'd seen her in the flesh—or bone—you'd 'ave kept a weather eye open, if only on sus. As it turned out, I had something to watch, 'cause Johnny got pallier and pallier with the young polone, and Ma Death got grimmer and grimmer till, suddenly, last day of the show, it happened.

" Right in the middle of the biggest pitch of the day, up pipes Johnny, ' Cut me throat if I tell a lie! ' And then, with a grin on his face like the side of a house, he picks up a knife, passes it across his throat; the blood pours out over his shirt-front, and he flops on the floor in a heap.

" There was one heck of a palaver, with the ambulance men,

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and blood all over the place. Last thing I know, Johnny's carted off to hospital and Ma Death mops up the blood, packs up the joint, and takes a powder. I never saw her again. There was something in the papers:

SALESMAN'S SENSATIONAL SUICIDE BID

But . . . well; I know what I know, and you know what I've told you." Ricky lifted his eyebrows at me, and leaned on the counter, waiting.

"Nark it, Ricky," I said, shaking my head sorrowfully. "He'd never have fallen for the same gag again. It might have given him an idea of his own, but why should he want to make away with himself?"

"Make away nothing," said Ricky scornfully. "And who said it was the same gag? You see, I went across to Johnny's joint after the bull and cow had died, and I took a quick look around—found what I was looking for too. Three or four deep scratches on an iron corner-support, just like someone had passed a knife blade across it to make it blunt. You see, Johnny had been mashing the girl who worked next door to the glass-cutter's stand and, while she kept an eye on the two of them, old Ma Death must have got ideas from the cutter's act. Every glass-cutter has two little wheels in its handle; you pass a knife-blade once between them and it'll cut paper with no more than its own weight behind it. See the idea?"

"You mean, Ma Death sharpened the dud knife, knowing Johnny would have no reason to suspect it wasn't as blunt as ever. Then, she made it blunt again, so's no one would suspect he hadn't made a mistake—or even used the sharp one on purpose. Diabolical! The neatest murder of all time," I said. "And she got off with it."

"Wrong again," smiled Ricky, "she got away with nothing. Johnny was a fly boy; he could put two and two together as good as his Missus, and stay a step ahead. He saw through her little game, and used it just as he wanted."

"No, go on!" I was incredulous. "You mean it was suicide after all?"

"Suicide, schmuicide!" said Ricky. "Give over. Johnny only slipped once, marrying a besom who wouldn't divorce him, and he wasn't the type to give up over that.

"You see, he'd let me in on her plan as soon as he'd rumbled her, and I'd watched her every move—that's why I checked up on the stand when she'd left. It takes a bit of resolution to cut your throat deliberately, and most people who try it bungle it anyway—ask a doctor. You have to go high and cut through the jugular vein, or deep and slice through the windpipe, or it's no go, and a

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couple of stitches, and maybe a blood transfusion'll see you right. So Johnny cut low and careful—no more than nicked hisself—and, with me as a witness, got Ma Death to divorce him on grounds he'd give. Did he have fun giving her the grounds!" Ricky smacked his lips.

I shook my head mournfully.

"All right, Ricky, you can tell the tale. I wouldn't buy that lot outside a comic paper."

"On my dead mother's grave!" Ricky's eyes were wide with sincerity. "If you don't believe me, ask Johnny."

He pointed triumphantly to a stand opposite where, leaning against a pillar and putting a strong comehither on a neat blonde piece with legs and eyelashes, was a dark-haired, debonair grafter in his forties, immaculately turned out.

As he lifted his head to sweep his hair off his forehead, I saw he had a thin red scar, about three inches long, just above the collar of his shirt.

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VANESSA

by Margaret Laurence

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By the author of The Stone Angel, and The Tomorrow-Tamer

WHEN the baby was almost ready to be born, something went wrong and my mother had to go into hospital two weeks before the expected time. I was wakened by her crying in the night, and then I heard my father's footsteps as he went downstairs to phone. I stood in the doorway of my room, shivering and listening, wanting to go to my mother but afraid to go lest there be some sight there more terrifying than I could bear.

"Hullo—Paul?" my father said, and I knew he was talking to Doctor Cates. "It's Beth. The waters have broken, and the fœtal position doesn't seem quite—well, I'm only thinking of what happened the last time, and another like that would be—I wish she were a little huskier, damn it—she's so—no, don't worry, I'm quite all right. Yes, I think that would be the best thing. O.K., make it as soon as you can will you?"

He came back upstairs, looking bony and dishevelled in his pyjamas and running his fingers through his sand-coloured hair. At the top of the stairs, he came face to face with Grandmother MacLeod, who was standing there in her quilted black satin dressing-gown, her slight figure held straight and poised, as though she was unaware her hair was bound grotesquely like white-feathered wings in a snare of coarse night-time hairnet.

"What is it, Ewen?"

"It's all right, Mother. Beth's having—a little trouble. I'm going to take her into hospital. You go back to bed."

"I told you," Grandmother MacLeod said in her clear voice, never loud, but distinct and ringing like the tap of a sterling teaspoon on a crystal goblet, "I did tell you, Ewen, did I not, that you should have got a girl in to help her with the housework? She should have rested more."

"I couldn't afford to get anyone in," my father said. "If you thought she should've rested more, why didn't you ever—oh God, I'm out of my mind tonight—just go back to bed, Mother, please. I must go to Beth."

When my father went down to the front door to let Doctor Cates in, my need overcame my fear and I slipped into my parents' room. My mother's black hair, so neatly pinned up during the day, was startlingly spread across the white pillowcase. I stared at her, not speaking, and then she smiled and I rushed from the doorway and buried my head upon her.

"It's all right, honey," she said. "Listen, Vanessa, the baby's just going to come a little early, that's all. You'll be all right. Grandmother MacLeod will be here."

"How can she get the meals?" I wailed. "She never cooks. She doesn't know how."

"Yes, she does," my mother said. "She can cook as well as

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anyone when she has to. She's just never had to very much, that's all. Don't worry—she'll keep everything in order, and then some."

My father and Doctor Cates came in, and I had to go, without saying anything I had wanted to say. I went back to my own room and lay with the shadows all around me. I listened to the night murmurings that always went on in that house, sounds which never had a source, rafters and beams contracting in the dry air perhaps, or mice in the walls, or a sparrow that had flown into the attic through the broken skylight. After a while, although I would not have believed it possible, I slept.

Next morning I questioned my father. I believed him to be not only the best doctor in Manawaka, but also the best doctor in the whole of Manitoba, if not in the entire world, and the fact that he was not the one who was looking after my mother seemed to have something sinister about it.

"But it's always done that way, Vanessa," he explained. "Doctors never attend members of their own family. It's because they care so much about them, you see, and—"

"And what?" I insisted, alarmed at the way he had broken off. But my father did not reply. He stood there, and then he put on that difficult smile with which adults seek to conceal pain from children. I felt terrified, and ran to him, and he held me tightly.

"She's going to be fine," he said. "Honestly she is. Nessa, don't cry—"

Grandmother MacLeod appeared beside us, steel-spined despite her apparent fragility. She was wearing a purple silk dress and her ivory pendant. She looked as though she were all ready to go out for afternoon tea.

"Ewen, you're only encouraging the child to give way," she said. "Vanessa, big girls of ten don't make such a fuss about things. Come and get your breakfast. Now, Ewen, you're not to worry. I'll see to everything."

Summer holidays were not quite over, but I did not feel like going out to play with any of the kids. I was very superstitious, and I had the feeling that if I left the house, even for a few hours, some disaster would overtake my mother. I did not, of course, mention this feeling to Grandmother MacLeod, for she did not believe in the existence of fear, or if she did, she never let on.

I spent the morning morbidly, in seeking hidden places in the house. There were many of these—odd-shaped nooks under the stairs, small and loosely nailed-up doors at the back of clothes closets, leading to dusty tunnels and forgotten recesses in the heart of the house where the only things actually to be seen were drab oil paintings stacked upon the rafters, and trunks full of outmoded clothing, and old photograph albums. But the unseen presences in these secret places I knew to be those of every person, young or old, who had ever belonged to the house and had died, including Uncle Roderick who got killed on the Somme, and the baby who would have been my sister if only she had managed to come to

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life. Grandfather MacLeod, who had died a year after I was born, was present in the house in more tangible form. At the top of the main stairs hung the mammoth picture of a darkly uniformed man riding upon a horse whose prancing stance and dilated nostrils suggested that the battle was not yet over, that it might indeed continue until Judgment Day. The stern man was actually the Duke of Wellington, but at the time I believed him to be my Grandfather MacLeod, still keeping an eye on things.

We had moved in with Grandmother MacLeod when the depression got bad and she could no longer afford a housekeeper, but the MacLeod house never seemed like home to me. Its dark red brick was grown over at the front with Virginia creeper that turned crimson in the fall until you could hardly tell brick from leaves. It boasted a small tower in which Grandmother MacLeod kept a weedy collection of anæmic ferns. The verandah was embellished with a profusion of wrought-iron scrolls, and the circular rose-window upstairs contained glass of many colours which permitted an outlooking eye to see the world as a place of absolute sapphire or emerald, or, if one wished to look with a jaundiced eye, a hateful yellow.

Inside, a multitude of doors led to rooms where my presence, if not actually forbidden, was not encouraged. One was Grandmother MacLeod's bedroom, with its stale and old-smelling air, the dim reek of medicines and lavender sachets. Here were silver framed photographs of Uncle Roderick—as a child, as a boy, as a man in his Army uniform.

The living-room was another alien territory where I had to tread warily, for many valuable objects sat just-so on tables and mantelpiece, and dirt must not be tracked in upon the blue Chinese carpet with its birds in eternal motionless flight and its water-lily buds caught forever just before the point of opening. My mother was always nervous when I was in this room.

The day my mother went to hospital, Grandmother MacLeod called me at lunch time, and when I appeared, smudged with dust from the attic, she looked at me distastefully as though I were a cockroach that had just crawled impertinently out of the woodwork.

"For mercy's sake, Vanessa, what have you been doing with yourself? Run and get washed this minute. Here, not that way—you use the back stairs, young lady. Get along now. Oh—your father phoned."

I swung round. "What did he say? How is she? Is the baby born?"

"Curiosity killed the cat," Grandmother MacLeod said, frowning. "I cannot understand Beth and Ewen telling you all these things at your age. What sort of vulgar person you'll grow up to be, I dare not think. No, it's not born yet. Your mother's just the same. No change."

I looked at my grandmother, not wanting to appeal to her, but unable to stop myself. "Will she—will she be all right?"

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Grandmother MacLeod straightened her already straight back. "If I said definitely yes, Vanessa, that would be a lie, and the MacLeods do not tell lies, as I have tried to impress upon you before. What happens is God's will. The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away."

Appalled, I turned so she would not see my face and my eyes. Surprisingly, I heard her sigh, and felt her hand on my shoulder.

"When your Uncle Roderick got killed," she said, "I thought I would die. But I didn't die, Vanessa."

At lunch, she chatted animatedly, and I realised she was trying to cheer me in the only way she knew.

"When I married your Grandfather MacLeod," she related, "he said to me, 'Eleanor, don't think because we're going to the prairies that I expect you to live roughly. You're used to a proper house, and you shall have one.' He was as good as his word. Before we'd been in Manawaka three years, he'd had this place built. He earned a good deal of money in his time, your grandfather. He soon had more patients than either of the other doctors.

"We had resident servants in those days, of course, and never had less than twelve guests for dinner parties. When I had a tea, it would always be twenty or thirty. Never any less than half a dozen different kinds of cake were ever served in this house. Well, no one seems to bother much these days. Too lazy, I suppose."

"Too broke," I suggested. "That's what Dad says."

"I can't bear slang," Grandmother MacLeod said. "If you mean hard up, why don't you say so? It's mainly a question of management, anyway. My accounts were always in good order, and so was my house. No unexpected expenses that couldn't be met, no fruit cellar running out of preserves before the winter was over. Do you know what my father used to say to me when I was a girl?"

"No," I said. "What?"

"God Loves Order," Grandmother MacLeod replied with emphasis. "You remember that, Vanessa. God loves order—He wants each one of us to set our house in order. I've never forgotten those words of my father's. I was a MacInnes before I got married. The MacInnes is a very ancient clan, the lairds of Morvern and the Constables of the Castle of Kinlochaline. Did you finish that book I gave you?"

"Yes," I said. Then, feeling some additional comment to be called for, "It was a smashing book, Grandmother."

This was somewhat short of the truth. I had been hoping for her cairngorm brooch on my tenth birthday, and had received instead the plaid-bound volume entitled *The Clans And Tartans Of Scotland*. Most of it was too boring to read, but I had looked up the motto of my own family and those of some of my friends' families. *Be then a wall of brass. Learn to suffer. Consider the End. Go carefully.* I had not found any of these slogans reassuring. What with Mavis Duncan learning to suffer, and Laura Kennedy considering the end, and Patsy Drummond going carefully, and I

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spending my time in being a wall of brass, it did not seem to me that any of us were going to lead very interesting lives. I did not say this to Grandmother MacLeod.

"The MacInnes motto is *Pleasure Arises From Work*," I said.

"Yes," she agreed proudly. "And an excellent motto it is too. One to bear in mind." She rose from the table, rearranging on her bosom the looped ivory beads that held the pendant on which a full-blown ivory rose was stiffly carved.

"I hope Ewen will be pleased," she said.

"What at?"

"Didn't I tell you?" Grandmother MacLeod said. "I hired a girl this morning, for the housework. She's to start tomorrow."

When my father got home that evening, Grandmother MacLeod told him her good news. He ran one hand distractedly across his forehead. "I'm sorry, Mother, but you'll just have to unhire her. I can't possibly pay anyone."

"It seems distinctly odd," Grandmother MacLeod snapped, "that you can afford to eat chicken four times a week."

"Those chickens," my father said in an exasperated voice, "are how people are paying their bills. The same with the eggs and the milk. That scrawny turkey that arrived yesterday was for Logan MacCardney's appendix, if you must know. We probably eat better than any family in Manawaka, except Niall Cameron's. People can't entirely dispense with doctors or undertakers. That doesn't mean to say I've got any cash. Look, Mother, I don't know what's happening with Beth. Paul thinks he may have to do a Cæsarean. Just leave the house alone. Don't touch it. What does it matter?"

"I have never lived in a messy house, Ewen," Grandmother MacLeod said, "and I don't intend to begin now."

"Oh lord," my father said. "Well, I'll phone Edna, I guess, and see if she can give us a hand, although God knows she's got enough, with the Connor house and her parents to look after."

"I don't fancy having Edna Connor in to help," Grandmother MacLeod objected.

"Why not?" my father shouted. "She's Beth's sister, isn't she?"

"She speaks in such a slangy way," Grandmother MacLeod said. "I have never believed she was a good influence on Vanessa. And there is no need for you to raise your voice to me, Ewen."

I could barely control my rage. I thought my father would surely rise to Aunt Edna's defence. But he did not.

"It'll be all right," he soothed her. "She'd only be here for part of the day, Mother. You could stay in your room."

Aunt Edna strode in the next morning. The sight of her bobbed black hair and her grin made me feel better at once. She hauled out the carpet sweeper and the weighted polisher and got to work. I dusted while she polished and swept, and we got through the living-room and front hall in next to no time.

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" Where's her royal highness, kiddo? " she inquired.

" In her room," I said. " She's reading a linen catalogue."

" Good glory, not again? " Aunt Edna cried. " The last time she ordered three linen teacloths and two dozen serviettes. It came to fourteen dollars. Your mother was absolutely frantic. I guess I shouldn't be saying this."

" I knew anyway," I assured her. " She was at the lace handkerchiefs section when I took up her coffee."

" Let's hope she stays there. Heaven forbid she should get on to the banqueting-cloths. Well, at least she believes the Irish are good for two things—manual labour and linen-making. She's never forgotten Father used to be a blacksmith, before he got the hardware store. Can you beat it? I wish it didn't bother Beth."

" Does it? " I asked, and immediately realised this was a wrong move, for Aunt Edna was suddenly scrutinising me.

" We're making you grow up before your time," she said. " Don't pay any attention to me, Nessa. I must've got out of bed on the wrong side this morning."

But I was unwilling to leave the subject.

" All the same," I said thoughtfully, " Grandmother MacLeod's family were the lairds of Morvern and the Constables of the Castle of Kinlochaline. I bet you didn't know that."

Aunt Edna snorted. " Castle, my foot. She was born in Ontario, just like your Grandfather Connor, and her father was a horse-doctor. Come on, kiddo, we'd better shut up and get down to business here."

We worked in silence for a while.

" Aunt Edna," I said at last, " what about Mother? Why won't they let me go and see her? "

" Kids aren't allowed to visit maternity patients. It's tough for you, I know that. Look, Nessa, don't worry. If it doesn't start tonight, they're going to do the operation. She's getting the best of care."

I stood there, holding the feather duster like a dead bird in my hands. I was not aware that I was going to speak until the words came out.

" I'm scared," I said.

Aunt Edna put her arms round me, and her face looked all at once stricken and empty of defences.

" Oh honey, I'm scared, too," she said.

It was this way that Grandmother MacLeod found us when she came stepping lightly down into the front hall with the order in her hand for two dozen lace-bordered handerchiefs of pure Irish linen . . .

I could not sleep that night and, when I went downstairs, I found my father in the den. I sat down on the hassock beside his chair, and he told me about the operation my mother was to have next morning. He kept on saying it was not serious nowadays.

" But you're worried," I put in, as though seeking to explain why I was.

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" I should at least have been able to keep from burdening you with it," he said in a distant voice, as though to himself. " If only the baby hadn't got itself twisted round—"

" Will it be born dead, like the little girl? "

" I don't know," my father said. " I hope not."

" She'd be disappointed, wouldn't she, if it was? " I said bleakly, wondering why I was not enough for her.

" Yes, she would," my father replied. " She won't be able to have any more, after this. It's partly on your account that she wants this one, Nessa. She doesn't want you to grow up without a brother or sister."

" As far as I'm concerned, she didn't need to bother," I retorted.

My father laughed. " Well, let's talk about something else, and then maybe you'll be able to sleep. How did you and Grandmother make out today? "

" Oh, fine, I guess. What was Grandfather MacLeod like? "

" What did she tell you about him? "

" She said he made a lot of money in his time."

" Well, he wasn't any millionaire," my father said, " but I suppose he did quite well. That's not what I associate with him, though."

He reached across to the bookshelf, took out a small leather-bound volume and opened it. On the pages were mysterious marks, like doodling, only much neater and more patterned.

" What is it? " I asked.

" Greek," my father explained. " This is a play called *Antigone*. See, here's the title in English. There's a whole stack of them on the shelves there. *Oedipus Rex*. *Electra*. *Medea*. They belonged to your Grandfather MacLeod. He used to read them often."

" Why? " I inquired, unable to understand why anyone would pore over those indecipherable signs.

" He was interested in them," my father said. " He must have been a lonely man, although it never struck me that way at the time. Sometimes a thing only hits you a long time afterwards."

" Why would he be lonely? "

" He was the only person in Manawaka who could read these plays in the original Greek," my father said. " I don't suppose many people, if anyone, had even read them in English translations. Maybe he would have liked to be a classical scholar—I don't know. But his father was a doctor, so that's what he was. Maybe he would have liked to talk to somebody about these plays. They must have meant a lot to him."

It seemed to me that my father was talking oddly. There was a sadness in his voice that I had never heard there before, and I longed to say something that would make him feel better, but I could not, because I did not know what was the matter.

" Can you read this kind of writing? " I asked hesitantly.

My father shook his head. " Nope. I was never very intellectual, I guess. Rod was always brighter than I, in school, but even he wasn't interested in learning Greek. Perhaps he would've been

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later, if he'd lived. As a kid, all I ever wanted to do was go into the merchant marine."

"Why didn't you, then?"

"Oh well," my father said off-handedly, "a kid who'd never seen the sea wouldn't have made much of a sailor. I might have turned out to be the seasick type."

I had lost interest now he was speaking once more like himself.

"Grandmother MacLeod was pretty cross today about the girl," I remarked.

"I know," my father nodded. "Well, we must be as nice as we can to her, Nessa, and after a while she'll be all right."

Suddenly I did not care what I said.

"Why can't she be nice to us for a change?" I burst out. "We're always the ones who have to be nice to her."

My father put his hand down and slowly tilted my head until I was forced to look at him.

"Vanessa," he said, "she's had troubles in her life which you really don't know much about. That's why she gets migraine sometimes and has to go to bed. It's not easy for her these days, either—the house is still the same, so she thinks other things should be, too. It hurts her when she finds they aren't."

"I don't see—" I began.

"Listen," my father said, "you know we were talking about what people are interested in, like Grandfather MacLeod being interested in Greek plays? Well, your grandmother was interested in being a lady, Nessa, and for a long time it seemed to her that she was one."

I thought of the Castle of Kinlochaline, and of horse-doctors in Ontario.

"I didn't know—" I stammered.

"That's usually the trouble with most of us," my father said. "You go on up to bed now. I'll phone tomorrow from the hospital as soon as the operation's over."

I did sleep at last, and in my dreams I could hear the caught sparrow fluttering in the attic, and the sound of my mother crying, and the voices of the dead children.

My father did not phone until the afternoon. Grandmother MacLeod said I was being silly, for you could hear the phone ringing all over the house, but nevertheless I refused to move out of the den. I had never before examined my father's books, but now, at a loss for something to do, I took them out one by one and read snatches here and there. After I had been doing this for several hours, it dawned on me that most of the books were of the same kind. I looked again at the titles.

Seven League Boots. Arabia Deserta. The Seven Pillars of Wisdom. Travels in Tibet. Count von Luckner, Sea Devil. And a hundred more. On a shelf by themselves were copies of an illustrated geographic magazine, which I had looked at often enough, but never before with the puzzling compulsion which

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I felt now, as though I were on the verge of some discovery, something which I had to find out and yet did not want to know. I riffled through the picture-filled pages. Hibiscus and wild orchids grew in a soft-petalled confusion. The Himalayas stood lofty as gods, with the morning sun on their peaks of snow. Leopards snarled from the vined depths of a thousand jungles. Schooners buffeted their white sails like the wings of giant angels against the great sea winds.

"What on earth are you doing?" Grandmother MacLeod inquired waspishly, from the doorway. "You've got everything scattered all over the place. Pick it all up this minute, Vanessa, do you hear?" So I picked up the books and magazines, and put them all neatly away, as I had been told to do.

When the telephone finally rang, I was afraid to answer it. At last I picked it up. My father sounded far away, and the relief in his voice made it unsteady.

"It's O.K., honey. Everything's fine. The boy was born alive and kicking after all. Your mother's pretty weak, but she's going to be all right."

I could hardly believe it. I did not want to talk to anyone. I wanted to be by myself, to assimilate the presence of my brother, towards whom, without ever having seen him yet, I felt such tenderness and such resentment.

That evening, Grandmother MacLeod approached my father, who, still dazed with the unexpected gift of neither life now being threatened, at first did not take her seriously when she asked what they planned to call the child.

"Oh, I don't know. Hank, maybe, or Joe. Fauntleroy, perhaps." She ignored his levity.

"Ewen," she said, "I wish you would call him Roderick."

My father's face changed. "I'd rather not."

"I think you should," Grandmother MacLeod insisted, very quietly, but in a voice as pointed and precise as her silver nail-scissors.

"Don't you think Beth ought to decide?" my father asked.

"Beth will agree if you do."

My father did not bother to deny something that even I knew to be true. He did not say anything. Then Grandmother MacLeod's voice, astonishingly, faltered a little.

"It would mean a great deal to me," she said.

I remembered what she had told me—"When your Uncle Roderick got killed, I thought I would die. But I didn't die." All at once, her feeling for that unknown dead man became a reality for me. And yet I held it against her as well, for I could see that it had enabled her to win now.

"All right," my father said tiredly. "We'll call him Roderick."

Then, alarmingly, he threw back his head and laughed.

"Roderick Dhu!" he cried. "That's what you'll call him, isn't it? Black Roderick. Like before. Don't you remember? As though he were a character out of Sir Walter Scott, instead of

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an ordinary kid who—" He broke off, and looked at her with a kind of desolation in his face. " I'm sorry, Mother," he said. " I had no right to say that."

Grandmother MacLeod did not flinch, or tremble, or indicate she felt anything at all. " I accept your apology, Ewen," she said.

My mother had to stay in bed for several weeks after she arrived home. The baby's cot was kept in my parents' room, and I could go in and look at the small creature who lay there with his tightly closed fists and his feathery black hair. Aunt Edna came in to help each morning and, when she had finished the housework, she would have coffee with my mother. They kept the door closed but this did not prevent me from eavesdropping, for there was a ventilator in the floor of the spare room, which was linked somehow with the ventilator in my parents' room. If you put your ear to the iron grille, it was almost like a radio.

" Did you mind very much, Beth? " Aunt Edna was saying.

" Oh, it's not the name I mind," my mother replied. " It's just the fact that Ewen felt he had to. You knew that Rod had only the sight of one eye, didn't you? "

" Sure, I knew. So what? "

" There was only a year and a half between Ewen and Rod," my mother said, " so they often went around together when they were youngsters. It was Ewen's air-rifle that did it."

Aunt Edna said heavily, " I suppose she always blamed him? "

" No, I don't think it was so much that, really. It was how he felt himself. I think he even used to wonder sometimes if—but people shouldn't let themselves think like that, or they'd go crazy. Accidents do happen, after all. When the war came, Ewen joined up first. Rod should never have been in the Army at all, but he couldn't wait to get in. He must have lied about his eyesight. It wasn't so very noticeable unless you looked at him closely, and I don't suppose the medicals were very thorough in those days. He got in as a gunner; Ewen applied to have him in the same company. He thought he might be able to watch out for him, I guess, Rod being—at a disadvantage. They were both only kids. Ewen was nineteen and Rod was eighteen when they went to France. And then the Somme . . .

" I don't know, Edna, I think Ewen felt that if Rod had had proper sight, or if he hadn't been in the same outfit and had been sent somewhere else—you know how people always think these things afterwards, not that it's ever a bit of use. Ewen wasn't there when Rod got hit. They'd lost each other somehow, and Ewen was looking for him, not bothering about anything else, you know, just frantically looking. Then he stumbled across him quite by chance. Rod was still alive, but—"

" Stop it, Beth," Aunt Edna said. " You're only upsetting yourself."

" Ewen never spoke of it to me," my mother went on, " until once his mother showed me the letter he'd written to her at the

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time. It was a peculiar letter, almost formal, saying how gallantly Rod had died, and all that. I guess I shouldn't have, but I told him she'd shown it to me. He was very angry that she had. And then, as though for some reason he was terribly ashamed, he said, 'I had to write something to her, but men don't really die like that, Beth. It wasn't that way at all.' It was only after the war that he decided to come back and study medicine and go into practice with his father."

"Had Rod meant to?" Aunt Edna asked.

"I don't know," my mother said slowly. "I never felt I should ask Ewen that."

Aunt Edna was gathering up the coffee things, for I could hear the clash of cups and saucers being stacked on the tray.

"You know what I heard her say to Vanessa once, Beth? 'The MacLeods never tell lies.' Those were her exact words. Even then, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry."

"Please, Edna—" my mother sounded worn out now—"don't."

"Oh glory," Aunt Edna said remorsefully, "I've got all the delicacy of a two-ton truck. I didn't mean Ewen, for heaven's sake. That wasn't what I meant at all. Here, let me plump up your pillows for you."

Then the baby began to cry, so I could not hear anything more of interest. I took my bike and went out beyond Manawaka, riding aimlessly along the gravel highway. It was late summer, and the wheat had changed colour, but instead of being high and bronzed in the field, it was stunted and desiccated, for there had been no rain again this year. But in the bluff where I stopped and crawled under the barbed wire fence and lay stretched out on the grass, the plentiful poplar leaves were turning to a luminous yellow and shone like church windows in the sun. I put my head down very close to the earth and looked at what was going on there. Grasshoppers with enormous eyes ticked and twitched around me, as though the dry air was perfect for their purposes. A ladybird laboured mightily to climb a blade of grass, fell off, and started all over again, seeming to be unaware that she possessed wings and could have flown up.

I thought of the accidents that might easily happen to a person—or, of course, might not happen, might happen to somebody else. I thought of the dead baby, my sister, who might as easily have been I. Would she, then, have been lying here in my place, the sharp grass making its small toothmarks on her brown arms, the sun warming her to the heart? I thought of the leather-bound volumes of Greek, and the six different kinds of iced cakes that used to be offered always in the MacLeod house, and the pictures of leopards and green seas. I thought of my brother, who had been born alive after all, and now had been given his life's name.

I could not really comprehend these things, but I sensed their strangeness, their disarray. I felt that whatever God might love in this world, it was certainly not order.

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We will sigh in the daisy's eye,
And kiss on a grass-green pillow.

Howling about the towers April comes
Swirling the rain-clouds over sun-washed hills,
Where roaming couples lift their laugh-flushed faces
Making unreal the thought that kills.
Lying in meadow at the city's edge
Girls finger daisies idly, and in dreams
Pair with boys on bicycles, who swing
Down leafy paths, bare-kneed in teams . . .

JOHN LEHMANN, *Evidence of Spring*

Lazy Daisy

Belinda was lying outstretched in a sunlit, daisy-carpeted glade, enclosed on three sides by a thicket of greenery . . . "What gods or goddesses does one worship here?" I asked.

"Aphrodite," said Belinda, plucking a daisy and putting it between her lips. "The goddess of love. Her statue used to be here, but it was taken away and sold."

"A pity," I said, lying back and gazing up into the unbelievably blue sky.

"Jasper," said Belinda, a few minutes later. "Would you like to worship Aphrodite?"

"Yes," I said, turning my head and studying the classical beauty of the temple outlined against the sky.

"You could still worship her, you know," said Belinda . . .

"Could I?" I said . . . "Then perhaps I will."

"When?"

"Just as soon as you take that daisy out of your mouth."

JOHN HADFIELD, *Love on a Branch Line*

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Where be you going, you Devon maid?
And what have ye there in the basket?
Ye tight little fairy, just fresh from the dairy,
Will you give me some cream if I ask it? . . .
I'll put your basket all safe in a nook;
Your shawl I'll hang on a willow;
And we will sigh in the daisy's eye,
And kiss on a grass-green pillow.

JOHN KEATS

Volte Face

I dressed myself hastily, anxious to fly from the scene of my folly. But I could not find my shoes. I searched everywhere . . . The door opened and he came in, his arms filled with bundles, water dripping from his sou'wester . . . He dropped the bundles on the bed and sniffed the air. "What? No coffee? I thought sure you'd put some coffee on."

I said, "I can't find my shoes."

He took them out of his raincoat pocket, grinning. "I was afraid you'd wake up and leave before I got back."

He had brought me a flower—a Shasta daisy—a big, shaggy flower on a long, long stem, with purple- lavender- orchid-pink petals curling like strong fingers, and a thick plushy centre of gold. I pictured him in the florist shop, surveying the hundreds of flowers, like a rich man selecting a precious gem—searching for the just the one unique and special one to bring me. How nice he was. I felt apologetic and grateful, and I loved him again . . .

NINA FAREWELL, *Someone to Love*

My Love could walk in richer hues
Than any bird of paradise . . .
And she could be the lily fair,
More richly dressed than all her kind,
And no one envy her her gain:
Since in her looks the world would see
A daisy that was sweet and plain.

W. H. DAVIES

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Moon Flower

She opened her arms, to what she did not know, to any sign the stars and the sea might send . . .

The stars sent a sign.

Out of the sky a daisy fell into her bosom. A moon-daisy . . .

"Thank you!" she called up to the thrilling sky.

"Whom are you thanking?" An Athenian had come to lean beside her.

"One of the gods."

"Which one?"

"I don't know." Which of the deities would drop a moon-daisy out of the night? Flora? Artemis? Eros?

"And do you know what you were thanking him for? I hope it was for calm waters. The wind's getting up."

"What does that mean?"

"A rough passage I'm afraid."

"Oh, don't be afraid, don't be afraid of anything."

Ariadne smiled at her daisy as if she and it shared a secret. She began to count the petals to herself. "He loves me . . ."

ELEANOR FARJEON, *Ariadne and the Bull*

Daisy chains

The knot-grass and the daisies catch thy toes,
To kiss my fair one's feet before she goes . . .

NATHANIEL HOOKES, 1653

"It's absolutely wonderful in the woods this morning," Mariette said . . . "you're not really going home today?"

A lyrical wave passed over Mr. Charlton. With distaste he remembered his office . . .

"If you're sure it's no trouble—"

"Trouble!" Ma said. "We *want* you. We love to have you."

"I've finished," Mariette said. "Like to get a breath of air?"

Mr. Charlton went to the door and stood in the sun. With reviving heart he stared across Pop's paradise . . . The near fringes of meadows, had become, overnight, white with moon-daisies, drifts of summer snow. A cuckoo called and was answered by another . . .

"How do you feel now?" Mariette said.

The pale face of Mr. Charlton broadened into its first unsteady daylight smile.

"A little more perfick than I was."

H. E. BATES, *The Darling Buds of May*

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The big girl said, " No man is worth it "

HIGH STAKES

BY GERALD KERSH

AS EDITOR, et cetera, of the Arcana *Eagle*, gentlemen, it was my duty to frequent the saloons, where most news and history are made. And of all these saloons the most newsy and historical was the Elite. It was a dull day that passed there without its splash of colour.

I mentioned the Elite. Some young fellow, given encouragement, would write a book about it nowadays. He would even devote two or three chapters to the characters of people like Little Sophie, and the gambler Oxenford—and oh my, what a business he might make of the duel Little Sophie fought for the affections of the piano player, the pitiful half-portion everybody called Tumbleweed, on account of his hair.

The Elite went in for fashionable music; and Yak the Swede, who owned the place had had a piano of the latest model shipped from Kansas City. Painted gold, and with silk panels and a stool to match. In a way Tumbleweed was made to match, too.

He was not the sort of person you would ordinarily shake hands with, for fear of breaking him, and he always wore a pink silk tie. He cried very easily, and smoked cigarettes; had pink nails and pink eyes with white lashes. He had a moustache which looked more vegetable than animal, if I make myself clear; carried a pocket comb—in general conducted himself in a kind of vague way . . . like tumbleweed. But he could play that piano so that it dazzled you to watch him crossing his hands, and he sang sentimental songs in one of those high tenor voices that made one feel that his back collar stud had come loose and that his coat wanted pulling down at the back.

All the girls were crazy about him—and I assure you that the girls at the Elite were not apt to let themselves go crazy over a Tumbleweed or twenty like him . . . But he had eyes only for Little Sophie.

And although it was her business to keep everybody happy, and she was the most popular lady at the Elite, anybody could

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see that, as far as Sophie was concerned, the sun rose and set with Tumbleweed.

I should add that Sophie was called "little" because she wasn't. She was a very fine figure of a woman, about five foot ten and built as they don't build 'em nowadays. She could crack a tabletop with her fist, or whip a mule-skinner. In the event of a rough-house I would rather have had Little Sophie to stand by me than almost any man in Arcana. Even Yak the Swede, who had a rough tongue, minded himself when he talked to Sophie. And although she could drink a quart of whisky at a sitting, she was healthy as a rose—naturally rose-like in complexion, and with genuine gold hair.

Even Oxenford was known to have a sneaking admiration for her—and he was the kind of man who admires nothing, respects nothing, fears nothing, and is wise to everything. You've seen the type described in stories—very pale, face without expression, flat eyes almost white, white linen, black moustache, black clothes, soft boots. He had not been in Arcana long. But he came well-heeled, and they said he could play poker without blinking or leaving the table for seventy-two hours straight. Such money as we had he won, but played straight. Had a reputation as a crack shot but a good sportsman.

But I was telling you about this duel . . .

It happened one night when the Elite was crowded, as usual, and Oxenford was playing in a five-handed game of stud. I was collecting news items in my memory at the bar. Tumbleweed had just been playing and singing some song that seemed to stick to your ears like molasses. Little Sophie went up to kiss him—her blue eyes full of tears—and give him some sort of pink sweet drink which he seemed to like. She was too big a girl to sit on his knee, so she picked him up, sat him on hers, fanned him with a handkerchief and combed his tumbly hair for him. I watched this somewhat nauseating exhibition, and it occurred to me that Tumbleweed smiled exactly like a sheep.

I remember it all distinctly. Oxenford had just shown aces and queens to somebody else's aces and jacks, and was pulling in a pile of chips. Everything was much as usual at the Elite.

Then, suddenly, Tumbleweed's face changed. It was ashen, and his mouth was now like the mouth of a hooked fish. He said something to Little Sophie, and I heard her fine big voice asking, "Hide you, honey? What from?"

He was staring at the half-doors. They had swung open; there stood a little sharp-faced woman in black, wearing one of those bonnets the shape of which nobody has ever been able to

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describe, but which look something like a carnation and something like broccoli. They are always black, and they tie under the chin. In her left hand she held a sort of monstrous reticule; in the other a long-handled umbrella.

She looked left and right through silver-rimmed glasses, and then went through the crowd—which made way for her as if she had been a swarm of bees—and straight to the piano.

Evidently she was shortsighted. She didn't see the pianist until she was within six feet of him. Then she said, "So that's where you are, Jeff Longman! I knew I'd find you if I looked long enough and low enough, you little monster. Get off that creature's lap, you disgusting little fiend, and come out of here. I'll deal with you when I get you home!"

Little Sophie stood up and said, "What did you call me, ma'am?"

"I called you a creature, which is better than you deserve, you common dancing girl. Take your filthy paws off that man. Get along with you, back where you belong, creature, and dance undraped among the savages!"

Now Sophie was, according to her lights, as decent a girl as breathed, but she swallowed the insult and said to Tumbleweed, "Who is this, honey? Your mama?"

The little woman said, "I will thank you, you fat animal, not to call my husband honey to my face. Oh, I know the wiles of the likes of you . . ."

"I am sure you do, ma'am," Little Sophie said, "for it's always the likes of you that's been brought up to 'em. Why don't you take those glasses off that you put on to make yourself look what you're not? Then you'll see better.

"It's a funny thing," Sophie said to the Elite in general, "that as soon as these prowlers catch themselves an innocent the first thing they do is put on glasses. Get out of it—you're too little for me to hit—too little and too old!"

The place became deathly quiet as the other woman hit Sophie with her umbrella.

Yak the Swede came up and said, "Ladies! Ladies, please! This is a respectable place of entertainment." Then, to Tumbleweed, "Is this lady your wife, or something?"

Tumbleweed burst into tears, as he often did when spoken to suddenly. Sophie answered for him, "Even if she was, and I think she's a liar, who'd blame him for running away? Go back to your flypaper, you gnat!"

Oxenford stood up, saying to the other players, "Game's over for now, gentlemen."

He pocketed his winnings and, joining the group at the piano,

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took matters in hand at once. In his rich, calm voice he said to the little woman, "Let's see. You say this gentleman is your husband?"

"I have papers to prove it!"

"Hm. And you, sir—is this lady your wife?"

Tumbleweed sobbed. The little woman, at this point, began to cry also, saying, "He's all I have. *I can't live without him.*"

Oxenford said, "But it appears he can't live *with* you."

Tumbleweed shook his head, speechless. Then Little Sophie wept and said, "Where he goes I go!"

"Mrs. Tumbleweed," Oxenford said, "the law presumably is on your side. But you cannot legislate a condition of the affections. Matters are complicated by you both being ladies. What anybody can see in that sugar-mouse there I can't imagine —but that's beside the point. If you were men it would be honourable and in order to advise you to approach each other from the two ends of the street with drawn revolvers and arrange the matter without mess or emotion, the survivor getting Tumbleweed . . . and welcome. I have seen ladies in hand-to-hand combat, but they were not ladylike ladies; and your sex never fights fair. It always descends to hatpins, fingernails, and the tearing out of hair. Such a spectacle is not to be encouraged. Besides, you are hopelessly ill-matched, and I will see fair play—"

"He's not worth it, but he's mine, and I'd commit murder for him!" screams the little woman.

"He doesn't want you he wants me, and he isn't yours—he's mine!" said Little Sophie, showing her beautiful white teeth.

"Ladies, ladies," says Oxenford, lifting a long pale hand. "A word, if you please. I have heard that in France actresses sometimes fight duels. But this is not France . . .

"You have both expressed your willingness to fight for this creat— this gentleman. Well, here is a test of true love. Play Russian Roulette for him."

"I abhor gambling," says the little woman.

"Ma'am, it is not so much gambling as an absolute submission to the order of things," says Oxenford. "Similarly, Russian Roulette does not involve your conscience. You spill the blood of no fellow human being.

"The game is played as follows: I have here a revolver—" He dropped one out of his sleeve into his right hand; a neat nickel-plated revolver of small calibre such as ladies once carried in their muffs—"a revolver of five chambers. It having been established by the turn of a card or the drawing of a straw, since you may be averse to the ungodly pasteboard, I empty this revolver. See, it is unloaded."

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He dropped four of the cartridges into a pocket and held up the fifth.

"This single cartridge I place in one of the chambers. I then spin the barrels several times. In turn each of you ladies places the muzzle of this little pistol to her ear and presses the trigger. One of you gets the bullet. The one that loses gets the prize-packet at present snivelling on the piano stool. Well?"

I was never more surprised than when the little woman in glasses, with a magnified glare of hate, said, "Very well. But no cards."

Little Sophie said, "All right. Somebody give me a drink, though. A short life and a merry one."

Oxenford said, "Called, so help me! I never thought you'd do it."

The news of this weird affair had gone the length and breadth of the town, and the Elite was crowded as it had never been before. There was a silence as the two women drew, short match to take first shot.

Little Sophie got it. She was very pale as she emptied her glass, took the revolver, and spun the cylinder so vigorously that the clicking of it actually did sound something like a roulette wheel in action.

Out of the silence came the gambler Oxenford's mellow voice saying, "Four to one the little woman wins Tumbleweed!" and there was a tremendous laying of bets.

With a sudden movement Sophie put the muzzle of the little revolver into her right ear and pulled the trigger. There was a dry click as the hammer fell on an empty chamber.

Sophie laughed aloud, and handed the gun to her rival, who first took off her glasses—a prudent woman, but game, gentlemen, game. She put the pistol to her right ear. The betting against her went up. She screwed up her eyes and stopped her left ear with a finger, evidently being averse to loud noises. A deathly hush; then a hollow click.

She also had got an empty chamber, but she did not laugh as Little Sophie had done. Her mouth was as tight as the snap of a purse.

Two barrels out of five gone; three to go, one loaded, and Sophie to take the next shot. The odds against her went up.

Some of us began to protest, now, that this thing had gone far enough. Even the gambler Oxenford said, "As far as the betting goes, ladies and gentlemen, it's play or pay. I shall be quite happy to arbitrate the matter bloodlessly, as with a throw of dice, or the matching of coins. The ladies have both shown courage and good faith enough."

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Sophie, whose turn was next, looked hopefully at the little woman. But she, as so often happens with these puritanical types, was caught in the grip of the gambling fever. In any case it wasn't her turn to fire and perhaps she reasoned that there would be time for compromise, if necessary, after her opponent had had her chance. So she forced the pistol on Little Sophie, who took another drink—a big one—and looked about her.

Tumbleweed had got behind the piano. Sophie sneered, red-faced now, for Yak the Swede's liquor had caught hold. She drew a tremendous breath, put the muzzle of the gun to her ear, and—click! She had drawn a blank again.

The odds were running wild, now. As Sophie let out her pent-up breath, some three or four hundred pairs of lungs emptied themselves so that the lamps flickered, for we had all been holding our breath in sympathy.

The little woman took the pistol. Staring straight at Sophie with her mean, black eyes she again put the pistol to her ear; then took it away and fastidiously wiped it with her handkerchief saying, " One cannot be too careful of contamination by creatures like that." There was a murmur of admiration.

At last she put the gun to her head and let the hammer fall. *Click!*

She smiled now—one of the meanest smiles I ever saw—and handed the pistol to Sophie with a mocking curtsy.

Oxenford said, " Well, ladies and gentlemen, the book is closed. It would seem that—without disrespect—the mare wins and the filly loses . . . Well, Sophie? "

The big girl looked at the pistol, and looked at the empty piano stool, and said in quite a small voice, " No man is worth it."

She returned the revolver to Oxenford, who flipped it back up his sleeve. Then she said to the little woman, " Take your tame canary to hell and go on out of here. He's all yours, every little bit of him. Put grenadine syrup in his birdseed at bedtime," she says, half-laughing and half-crying, " and I wish you luck because I admire your nerve."

Then Tumbleweed came out from behind the piano and the little woman dragged him away.

The Elite, somehow, was never quite the same after that night. Little Sophie kind of fretted, got unsociable, and at last became unpopular. There was an illogical feeling among the boys that she had somehow let them down. She packed up eventually and went away. Oxenford then complained that things were getting dull and slack in Arcana. He went, too.

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A little later I had to go to Kansas City, Missouri, on business and put up at the Ambassador Hotel. Who should I meet there but Tumbleweed and his little woman—only she looked svelte and lively in oyster-coloured satin, quite pretty without her glasses, her eyes like stars. They were two of a foursome at a table, the others being Little Sophie and Oxenford, very genteel.

They invited me to join them over a bottle of champagne, and I took the opportunity of asking Oxenford, " Is it a fact that you cleared thirty thousand making the book on that Russian Roulette game? "

" Confidentially, my friend, it was nearer forty," said he.

" I often wondered. You unloaded and loaded that little pistol, Mr. Oxenford. Without questioning your integrity, I occasionally wondered whether that was a live cartridge you gave the ladies to play with? "

The little woman said with a laugh, " Oh come, sir! Do you take Little Sophie's husband for a complete fool? "

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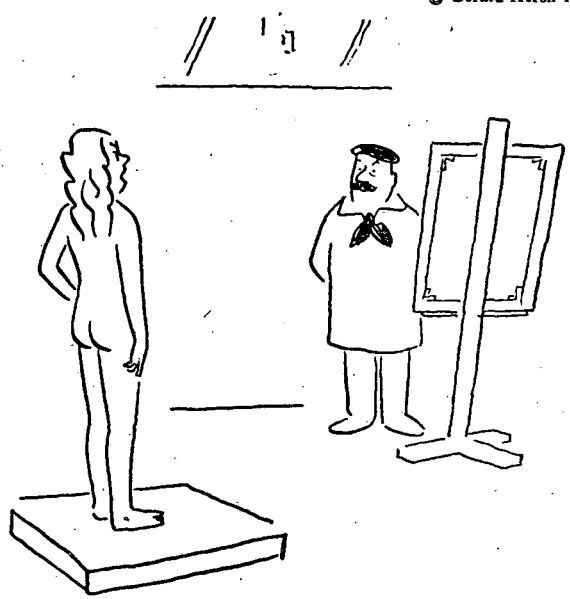

" Hey, what goes on here? Last week no canvas, this week no paint."

Drawing by Chon Day
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Nights in Pagoda Street

WE turned into Pagoda Street. It was long and very narrow, the walls of the houses flaking, mildewy, and the windows lifeless, like sockets without eyes, for they had no glass in them. The first storeys of all the houses protruded over dark pavements and were supported on wide pillars alongside the street, forming arcades. These were called five-foot ways because they were supposed to be five feet wide. They were so alive in daytime, but all the trotting up and down had long since ceased and they were now empty except for the few men sleeping under the pale shrouds of mosquito nets. It was one o'clock in the morning.

Farther down, near the crossing of Trengganu Street, there was life; two or three street stalls lined up, chairs and tables at random and men eating at them. The driver stopped his taxi. Before getting out I asked him his name.

"My name is Kan Choon Seng," he said.

"Choon Seng," I repeated, then we got out.

There was the crash and splutter of cooking-fat, the chop-chop-chop of chicken being prepared, the bubbles and fuss of cooking. A fat Chinese in undershorts buried himself behind his street stall, the glare of pressure lamps shining on his sweaty face and neck. Some men playing mah-jong shouted at him to hurry up while they banged down the pieces in rapid succession. A woman clattered past, her wooden clogs scraping along the road.

Choon Seng and I sat at a table next to the mah-jong players

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BY TARQUIN OLIVIER

Tarquin Olivier, still in his twenties, has a yen for adventure which took him roaming round the Far East for two years, from Indonesia to Malaya, to Bali, to Bangkok . . . He compressed a life's experiences into his wanderings and recorded it in his first book, *Eye of the Day*—coming out soon—from which Argosy brings you this heart-warming account of a stay with a Singapore taxi driver.

Tarquin Olivier, the son of Sir Laurence Olivier, is studying tropical agriculture, is a bachelor, and hopes to marry in about two books' time.

and he raised his voice above the din to tell the cook that we wanted our noodles. Chinese was a funny-sounding language, like a string of monosyllables all tied up together and sung in about eight different tones. The fat man grinned from his neck up to his ears in acknowledgment of our order and dolloped a whole lot of vegetables into his frying-pan with a rush of bubbles and steam.

Two Chinese came over to us and sat down. Choon Seng said that one of them, a young fellow of about eighteen, was his Fourth Brother, called Eng Teck.

"Eng Teck," I said to myself. I could not take it seriously. Choon Seng and Eng Teck laughed in return and it seemed we would get on splendidly.

Three or four others joined us, most of them in vests and undershorts, and the taxi driver started telling them about me in his singsong Chinese. They nodded and smiled and looked from

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him to me, delighted as he warmed to the telling of his stories. The fat cook brought some bowls and chopsticks and noodles over to us. I picked up a pair of chopsticks and set to while Choon Seng continued telling stories. Everyone, in the midst of shovelling in mouthfuls of rice, agreed with whatever he said. Eventually I asked Eng Teck what he had been talking about.

He swallowed. " First Brother says he sees you eat with chopsticks like we Chinese." Choon Seng enlarged upon his theme and everyone turned to watch me. Eng Teck said my skill with chopsticks made them all very pleased. His brother had never seen an Englishman eat with chopsticks so well. It was pleasing until I noticed that they had all finished eating while my bowl was still half full.

Choon Seng turned to me. " What do you do now, then? " he asked.

" I hope to see my friend Pok Kum Weng in Sago Lane. He has asked me to stay with him."

Choon Seng turned to his younger brother and began talking earnestly. They both got up, said they would leave me for a while, and wandered out of the range of light round the street stalls. They disappeared in the darkness of the five-foot way and I suppose they went into one of the houses.

Suddenly the conviviality vanished. I tried to converse with the Chinese who remained around me but none of them spoke English. Malay was no good either. Their silence became tense and I wondered whether I would ever feel at ease among them. One by one they left until there was nobody sitting near me—the mah-jong players had long since packed up, the fat cook was nodding asleep in a chair beside his fire. A wooden cart was pushed past by a skeleton of an old man; I looked at his straining elbows and scraggy neck, the patch of sweat on his vest, the jerky steps as he pushed the cart down the street. The rumble of the wheels died away. I must have dozed off.

I woke with a start when the taxi driver and his younger brother came back. As soon as they sat down Choon Seng looked at me earnestly and said, " Do not live in Sago Lane." It sounded as if he had made up his mind about something after talking things over with Eng Teck.

" Why not? "

" Because why, it is very noisy. They play musical instruments, marching in the street all day long. They play mah-jong all night. Every time there are funeral processions. Because why I tell you, they have death houses there where old people go, so they are looked after, but then they die and all the relatives are drinking and playing mah-jong . . ."

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" But I can sleep through anything . . ."

" Do not go to Sago Lane. Because why I tell you: it is very dangerous. We do not know the people there. They have horrible gangsters. My brother and I want you to stay here," he said suddenly. " We want you to be our guest, our friend. Yes, can! We will look after you. You eat with us. You sleep with our family. Can! " He beamed at me.

" I come tomorrow night," I said.

It seemed best to arrive at night. To arrive in the daytime would have raised all sorts of problems, embarrassments, and awkwardness for them, not knowing what to do with a complete stranger; but at night we would all of us have to go to sleep. In the morning we would wake up together, the initial shyness behind us.

" I shall be very late," I said, " about midnight, because I have to have dinner with an American friend."

" Also can! " Eng Teck had joined the chorus. " And First Brother says I must look after you. He lives somewhere else. I live here with our father and my three sisters."

" Fine," I said.

" I take you home then," said Choon Seng.

" Good."

We got into his taxi and said good night to Eng Teck. " Just a minute," I said. " Which is your house? "

" Number 870 B." He pointed. " That one, the window on the second floor." I looked up at it.

I had dinner with my American friend. It was a wonderful meal. I savoured every mouthful of ham cooked with pineapple, blueberry-pie, and cheese, and he gave me some brandy afterwards. Unfortunately curiosity about my visit to Chinatown manifested itself in a very distressing way. The conversation centred round a series of gang-fights which had been reported in full by the morning papers. They had taken place only two streets from where I was going to live.

As the American drove me past Hong Kong Street and North Canal Road I began to wonder whether I would in fact be safe. I wished out loud that I had had another brandy. The American chuckled awkwardly.

It was drizzling. Brightly-lit Chinese characters were jumbled together on innumerable signs and shop hoardings, their reflections wriggling across the wet street. The only names in English were Upper Hokien Street, Upper Nankin Street, Chin Chew Street, each written on a modest wooden board, stuck on a wall of damp plaster.

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The American tried to keep some sort of conversation going but I couldn't answer him. I was looking out of the window, wondering at the energy of the Chinese people, all hurrying along the five-foot ways where it was dry.

Mosque Street. From the main road it looked as narrow as a prison corridor. Each level of windows was a row of cubicles, and every window provided daylight for an entire family.

The next neat English sign said Pagoda Street and we turned into it.

" Are you sure that this is where you are going to live? "

I asked him to drop me halfway down, by the street stalls. They were still crowded as it was eleven o'clock . . .

I stood with suitcase in hand and watched him drive away. Now that I had come to stay it felt as if all resolve was sinking into my feet. The lighting was so poor that it made the walls look like asbestos, forgotten for ever. The five-foot ways were in total darkness except for joss sticks glowing in little boxes on every pillar. I found comfort in their ember redness and the thought that people had put them there with care, perhaps with a wish.

I walked among the street stalls and recognised nobody. I said " Eng Teck " to several people in the hopes that they would go and fetch him. I didn't dare to go into his house alone in case I met someone who took a dislike to me. " Eng Teck," I repeated. But the impassive faces at the tables, the mah-jong players in their underpants, and the fat old men drinking coffee, all turned away after a cursory glance at me and my suitcase. I gripped it tightly and wandered on.

A lot of empty barrows were heaped together in an alleyway. Pale brown by daylight, they were now a strange silver colour from the pressure lamps hissing twenty yards behind me. Men lay across them sound asleep, as soft as shadows.

Someone called to me . . . There were footsteps. It was Eng Teck.

I shouted out a welcome, but Eng Teck said rather crossly that he had been waiting for me, and with that he picked up my suitcase and told me to follow.

He led me down the five-foot way; his gym shoes were soft on the pavement. The clatter around the street stalls was behind us. I followed him closely for it was hard to see.

He turned into a passage. It was so dark in there that I felt blindfolded with black velvet. The air was suffocatingly dead. His voice was close to my ear when he said, " Some stairs here." They creaked noisily as he began to climb. I had to grope for them with my hands.

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At the top of the landing shone a red light. On the wall behind it was an old Chinese print of the god of war with distended nostrils and ferocious, globular looks.

Eng Teck turned on the passage light, dazzling both of us. He stopped halfway up the next flight of stairs in front of a big teak door reinforced with steel braces, and pulled a bit of string which dangled beside it.

A bell tinkled above us. We waited. Someone shuffled across the floor overhead and there was silence. Eng Teck stamped impatiently. He looked up at the ceiling as something rustled. A steel bolt snapped sharply back and the door sprang open without a sound.

We went inside and the door shut with a crash, shaking the whole building.

I looked up the remaining stairs and saw another red light, another Chinese print with the joss sticks and paraphernalia of a family shrine.

Beneath it stood a wispy, straw-coloured old man with a veinous throat and sunken hollow cheeks. He trotted down the passage on bare feet.

Eng Teck took his shoes off. I followed suit and he put both pairs in a boot-rack. The passage was very narrow. In it was a bench upon which another old man lay stretched out asleep in his underclothes.

At the end was a little room about twenty feet by eight, as cluttered as the hall of a boarding-house, lit by a naked light bulb dangling from the ceiling. Beyond was a window looking on the street.

Two little children lay side by side on the floor clutching pillows to their bodies as they slept. Eng Teck dragged them to one side, making space for us to sit down.

I sat under the window and looked at the little room. All I could take in at first were two doorways on the left wall, a large wooden bed in the corner, then the passage. Along the right wall were two chairs and a small table and a cupboard with glass doors and some magazines in it.

"But where's the rest of the family?" I asked.

"All here," he said smiling, a trace of triumph in his attitude, as if he realised his home was something of an adventure to me.

"Where?"

"All here. That's my father," he said, pointing at the bedstead.

Sitting in the corner was the old man who had let us in, almost unnoticeable against the wall of grey plaster. He was slowly rubbing the back of his neck.

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"But who else?" I asked, looking round. Now I began to notice how neatly everything was stacked away; little boxes on shelves, medium-sized boxes in the corner, big boxes stacked under the bed. Not an inch of space was wasted. And the room was, despite its tattiness, remarkably clean. The floorboards were shiny—perfectly all right for the children to be sleeping on. Perhaps that was why Eng Teck was so meticulous about taking shoes off before coming in.

"Fifth and Sixth Sisters are here," he said.

"Where?" I was incredulous.

He laughed outright. "No! They are up there looking at you."

Above the door there was a big shelf with a balustrade, jutting into the room like a sleeping-bunk. And resting upon the balustrade were two Chinese faces, two sets of Chinese eyes brimming with glee, with grins as broad as the Cheshire Cat's. I could scarcely believe they were real.

"How old are they?" I asked awkwardly.

"Fifth Sister is twenty-two, and Sixth Sister is nineteen. Don't be shy if they look at you."

Their excitement was infectious. Eng Teck watched, then said, "I see you are not shy. You want your bath I prepare for you?"

"Is it all right this time of night?"

"You want you want your bath I prepare for you." It was a command.

He said something to his sisters who ducked behind their balustrade and he trotted down the passage, disappearing into the darkness. I heard him drag a tin washtub across the floor and turn the water on. I opened my suitcase, took out a sarong and undressed, using the sarong as a tent. One of the sisters peeked at me then vanished.

While waiting for Eng Teck to return I again wondered where the rest of the family was. Whom did the children belong to? Who lived in the two cubicles next to this one? The old man was watching me the while, as if I were somebody he hadn't spoken to for years and he couldn't remember why.

"Your bath I have prepared for you," Eng Teck announced. He took me along the passage, past the bench where his father's brother was sleeping—Old Uncle I called him eventually—past the staircase and two doorways.

Then he stopped.

"We put on wooden slippers," he said. We did so, then clattered across the stone floor of the kitchen. He took me into a cupboard which had a candle on a shelf.

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"Everything is ready," he said. "Soap, one towel, and here is my toothbrush for you, clean your teeth."

I thanked him, but said I had a toothbrush of my own.

He shrugged. "If you want my toothbrush. O.K. Can." And with that he closed the door and left.

I hung my sarong on a nail and got into the tub. The water was pleasantly cool and I sat in it, my legs sticking over the edge of the tub. The candle glowed on the dank walls and on me. I felt peculiarly naked, washing like that.

When I had finished and emptied the water I went back to the room. Eng Teck was sitting on the floor looking up at his sisters and joking with them.

He looked at me with reproof and said, "You have been drinking alcohol."

"I haven't!"

"I can smell your breath."

It must have been the brandy the American had given me after dinner; it certainly seemed long past now. I explained that the drink had been to give me courage. He promptly repeated the story to his sisters and their laughter was friendly. He told them to come down and they both went to the back of the shelf.

Fifth Sister reappeared feet first down a step ladder by the door. She was wearing a well-pressed pyjama suit called a samfu. It was a typically Chinese combination of practicality and smartness: simply cut to give just sufficient an idea of the female form, with short sleeves and a high collar. She was followed by her younger sister and they both sat on the floor with us. Her eyes were so wide apart and her cheekbones so high that I could not tell whether she was giving me a come-hither, or a teasing look.

I asked Eng Teck who lived behind the curtains of the first cubicle. He said there were his Fourth Sister, her husband, and their three children. He added tersely that the cubicle measured eight feet by ten and was all that that little family had.

"And the other cubicle?"

He dismissed the subject with a wave of the hands. "Just neighbours."

I stared at him in astonishment.

"Yes," he said, "we do not know them. They are just neighbours."

"But what do you mean—just neighbours? Who are they? They must use your kitchen and everything. You must know them!"

He gave me a sideways glance. "They are not part of the

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family. So what do we know of them? Look . . . I can tell you there is a woman in there who is left by her husband. She has her two children there. She works in a factory." He hesitated. "But what more do I want to know? They are not part of the family. They live there and that's all."

Brother-in-law came out and joined us, followed by wife, baby, and two children. A sing songtalk began, with smiling, laughter, and nodding of heads; everyone's eyes screwed up in the bright light. Old Uncle woke up and came in from his bench. Two old Chinese maidservants, called amahs, with long pigtails, trotted in from a room down the passage. Then the neighbours poked their heads out of their cubicle—not to complain about the noise as I had anticipated, but to take part. Even Old Father stopped rubbing the back of his neck and his face furrowed from ear to ear as he smiled. Sixteen of us were now huddled into the tiny room; clusters of arms and pyjama'd legs and bare feet and bewildered children sitting awkwardly among them looking as if they wanted to laugh but didn't quite dare. We were having a party.

Eng Teck called to the eldest of the children, a little girl aged about nine, gave her twenty cents and told her to buy some coffee. She took a kettle, picked her way between the arms and legs and went into the passage. She put on some wooden slippers and took hold of a rope at the top of the stairs. She jerked it sharply and there was a metallic clank as the door opened below. She clattered downstairs and the door crashed shut.

I went to the window to look at her in the street. It was past midnight yet the street stalls were still doing business. The little girl skipped over to the fat man with her kettle. Then she reached up to take it and looked inside to see that it was full.

The doorbell rang and in the room there was a momentary hush. Old Uncle went to answer it. He got on to his knees in the passage, lifted up a corner of the linoleum and looked through a hole in the floor. When satisfied that it was the little girl who rang and nobody else he jerked the rope and let her in.

Cups were handed round and the party resumed. It lasted about twenty minutes. Brother-in-law finished his coffee, gave his cup to his wife, trod between Fifth and Sixth Sister's feet, stepped into his cubicle and went to bed. His wife tugged her unwilling baby away from her breast and turned it round to face me. It yawned, rubbed its eyes and gaped at me in blank astonishment, then cried, which made me feel very guilty. The mother hushed it, shook it severely, shoved a plastic nipple into its mouth, and went to join her husband.

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The neighbours departed to their cubicle, Fifth and Sixth Sisters climbed up to their shelf, and the two old amahs padded down the passage to their room, their pigtails swinging behind them.

Eng Teck told the little girl to go to bed. She was the daughter of his brother, the taxi driver, who lived too far away for her to get to school every morning from his place. She had been sitting crosslegged making faces at me throughout the party. Eng Teck walloped her backside as she got up and hustled into Brother-in-law's cubicle. As she held back the curtain I could see baby lying on the floor, its arms outspread and the nipple still in its mouth, the mother and two children sleeping beside it, the father lying across the bed on his stomach.

Only the old men remained. Uncle sat on the chair, his knees drawn up under his chin, and Father was picking his teeth, each in his separate world of silence. A clock on the wall said it was half past one.

Eng Teck yawned and got up. "Time to sleep again," he said.

He took a camp-bed from the corner, unfolded it, straightened it out and said it was for me. He turned off the light and stretched out on the floor. I lay on my back on the camp-bed and looked along the passage. It was pitch dark except for the little red light above the family shrine. Old Uncle shuffled down to his bench. His fragile body collapsed upon it with hardly a sound.

The light was silvery from the street below. I let my eyes wander slowly, gazing here and there at things which were soon to become familiar: the shelves with boxes; the tiny balcony, creaking momentarily as one of the sisters moved in her sleep; the ladder, the row of pegs with towels and flannels hanging on them side by side; the line of family photographs, girls in cheongsams, in wedding-dress, brothers and fathers and uncles, all posed and smiling in picture frames. A Coca Cola calendar was pinned above the wireless on the bookshelf. Beside it was a Chinese almanac, the size of a telephone directory, telling the best days for marriage, for giving parties, how to choose names . . .

I looked at the curtains of the cubicles beside me, each the home of a family and children, each measuring eight feet square.

From outside in the street came the sound of someone clattering across to the street stalls. A cart rumbled down a side alley. A baby cried out in the house opposite and the mother hushed it. Then everything was still, and the very stillness magnified the feeling of closeness, of being near to other people's thoughts and fitful dreamings . . .

I awoke late to the sound of bare feet shuffling, household bustle,

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and a baby crying. As I focused my eyes, I saw that Eng Teck was looking at me critically. "You want your bath I prepare for you?" I followed him into the passage. Five or six men were milling around there—quite pleasant-looking men in underpants. The men were a bit pale perhaps, but nothing out of the ordinary, I reflected, as Eng Teck led me through the kitchen. Sixth Sister was washing clothes in the sink. Buckets of charcoal stood ready for cooking lunch.

I had my bath, shaved, and found to my relief that there was a little squatting place, with a cistern and a roll of paper. I felt more of a man. When I returned to the cubicle I realised that the men in the passages were opium smokers. That explained the peepholes in the floor, the bell signals and the reinforced door in the stairway. The men looked suspicious as I trotted past in a sarong. I tried to appear unobtrusive.

Eng Teck was eyeing me again. I didn't say anything about the smokers but sat down and started brushing my hair. He watched me as I dressed. I put on my trousers, sat down again, lit a cigarette, and waited for him to break the silence.

As it became apparent to him that I was not going to ask uncalled-for questions he looked happier. "What do you do today?"

Now that was the most awkward thing he could possibly have asked. I was having lunch with the Head of Customs, who had agreed to see me when I had told him about my interest in opium, which stemmed from a night I spent watching an opium smoker in a beach hut. The addiction was now sufficiently rare for it to be interesting; but having decided to write about it, it seemed only fair to find out what was being done to prevent it.

Clearly I would have to wait until Eng Teck had more confidence in me before I would be able to tell him that. So I answered, "I'm going to have lunch with a friend who has a motor-boat."

"A motor-boat?"

"A motor-boat." I said it with such aplomb that he let it pass.

Lunch with the Head of Customs was pleasant and entertaining. He went to considerable trouble to give me information about opium, and arranged for me that afternoon to visit the island where opium addicts were rehabilitated.

I went by motor-boat. The idyllic surroundings of the rehabilitation centre, its buildings, its workshops, where the inmates could learn skilled trades to keep themselves and their families when they were released, and the understanding of the officials for the men in their charge, all indicated that the place was a success.

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Apart from the struggle to rehabilitate known addicts, the aim of the customs and police was to cut off the supply of opium, which at that time fetched about fifty pounds sterling for a pound in weight. This was a long-term struggle. Although they knew the sites of the opium dens, they did not rely upon raids: that would have led to the trafficking of drugs which were easier to conceal, and more harmful. For these reasons, I was reassured that nobody would get into trouble if I wrote about the cubicle in Chinatown.

I returned late in the afternoon. Eng Teck, on holiday from school, was standing at the window watching all the people at the street market. He turned round and said he had been worried about me. He added that while I was away Sixth Sister had gone through my suitcase looking for clothes which needed washing.

"Your underwear was very dirty," he said solemnly. "Your shirts and trousers also."

I gasped. My trousers? Help! Had Sixth Sister washed my dinner jacket too? I flung open my case and found to my indescribable relief that it was still there.

"Your clothes Sixth Sister has washed. They are hanging out to dry."

"Where?"

He pointed out of the window.

I looked out. There, hanging over the street on a pole, were my shirts, socks, pants, vests, and handkerchiefs, and a pair of sports trousers, and next to them was another pole with samfus and black silk shorts. They looked like the pennants of a ship. Every window down the street was decked with other people's bunting.

Later on, when Eng Teck asked me where I had been, I thought it best to tell him the truth. He was not in the least disconcerted. I suppose he must have summed me up better than I gave him credit for; or, which is more probable, he was quite sure where he stood vis-à-vis the opium-smokers.

The opium den carried on its own separate existence in so far as anything could in so small a dwelling. The customers began arriving at about seven in the morning. Most of them were quite ordinary-looking: shopkeepers and grocers, family men on their way to the day's work. They would have four or five pipes while reading the newspapers after breakfast: the atmosphere of the place was as simple as that.

One morning when the bell rang, I went to answer it because everyone else was busy. I got down on all fours and peeked through the hole in the floor to see that it was an opium addict and not a policeman; then I pulled the string and let him in. He

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thanked me, took off his trousers and shirt and hung them on a peg in the passage. His shoes he put in a rack by the stairs.

It was dark in the opium room except for the tiny oil lamp in the middle of the floor. The man lay down on the other side of the lamp and the woman set about preparing a pipe for him. She lifted up a floorboard and took out a cloth which she spread in the circle of dim light from the lamp. It contained a saucer the size of half an eggshell full of black stuff. The man watched her as she scooped out some of it with a needle.

She must have been beautiful when young. Her well-preserved skin was smooth as a candle, her face aquiline and authoritative. Her black silk trousers hid the thinness of her legs. She wore the long pigtail, which had grown ever since her childhood, to show that she was still virgin.

The man watched her as she moulded the opium into a little ball the size of an olive pip. She took the pipe and laid it on the floor beside the lamp. It was of bamboo, two feet long, blackened with age and handling, with an ivory mouthpiece and a bowl, shaped like a top, about six inches from the end. She stuck the opium on the point of the needle and held it over the flame. It grew soft and began to bubble and all the while the man gazed at it with beady eyes. In the steady light of the flame his cheeks and temples and eyelids looked more sunken, as still as in death.

The woman picked up the pipe, put the black stuff in the bowl carefully, and then plunged in the needle and jerked it out, leaving a little hole through the pastil of opium. The pipe was ready.

She lay on her side opposite the man, who now rested himself more comfortably, his head on a wooden support. She held the bowl of the pipe upside down over the flame and handed him the mouthpiece. He licked his lips apprehensively, then put it into his mouth. He began to inhale and the pipe gurgled.

The woman's face was strained as she held the pipe for him, her lips drawn back in a half smile, her gold tooth glinting as she concentrated on keeping the opium the right distance from the flame.

The man took the smoke deep into his lungs. The whole of his body seemed to go limp; his eyes narrowed as he inhaled deeper and deeper. The opium bubbled over the flame. The man seemed to linger, his lips quivering round the ivory mouthpiece.

The gurgling ceased and he sat up. He let out his breath and gave a throaty, happy sigh. "Good for the heart," he said, then lay down while the woman prepared him some more . . .

When he had had six pipes, he lay on his back and talked softly

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to the woman. Then some other men came in to smoke. After about an hour, for each preparation was a troublesome business involving patience and skill on the part of the woman, all the men had had satisfaction, and they were now utterly relaxed, abandoned to euphoria. They were soothed and happy and companionable.

The associations with opium-smoking appeared to be agreeable, and twelve pipes a day seemed to do no harm. Most of the men who came to the den smoked about that and they bore none of the outward signs of addiction. But some smoked thirty, some fifty, and they hardly looked like men: shrunken bodies and thighs like spiders' legs, and bloodless heads which looked like the moon. And many of those who came had left their mothers and fathers, their wives and children, so that they could devote all they had to being the faithful lover of a drug.

No matter how hard one tried, one could not forget the opium-smokers because they were always there; the musty but pungent smell, the groans of satisfaction, the strangers who had to be let in by a secret signal and a barricaded door. Their presence increased my claustrophobia. Even when the bell rang and it was a member of the family there was always the harping suspicion that it might have been the police.

There were many happy moments to share in that little place. I loved Eng Teck's persuading me to stay on, and his protests that I must not give him anything . . . he and his family wanted to keep me as a good friend, and wanted nothing from me except for me to be with them. When, after a week, I told him I must leave, he said that that was impossible because they needed my company. At the end of the second week, I explained that I had to go to see some important friends in Malaya. He was unimpressed and insisted that I be with them for the Chinese Moon Festival.

That gave me a chance to give them something without offending them. I asked some Chinese friends what I could give; something for the house, perhaps, or some snappy shirts and trousers. To my surprise they suggested money. After dozens of huddled discussions around street stalls they decided that forty Malayan dollars—five pounds—would be the right sum, and any more would be too much.

I put the money into an envelope together with a photograph of myself, and one evening, when the family were all sitting around enjoying not having to do anything in particular, I gave it to Eng Teck and said it was a present. He took the photograph out of the envelope, and was delighted; so were his sisters and the neighbours, who were allowed the occasional look-see.

Then he saw the forty dollars inside the envelope, and handed it

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back. " Keep this," he said. " We do not want your money; you are our friend."

I begged him to take it. I wanted so much to give him something, I said. I would be unhappy to give nothing. I pleaded that the present was for the Moon Festival, and that he could buy something for the children to give them a happy time.

Finally, he agreed to accept it.

The following day he bought me two new shirts because Sixth Sister had said that mine were a disgrace . . .

During the Moon Festival their little room glowed with Chinese lanterns casting coloured patterns on the walls. The table was piled high with moon cakes like mince pies and red paper painted with Chinese characters in gold, but the only people to whom the festival meant anything were the two old amahs.

" What for you worry about the Moon Festival? " said Eng Teck. " I tell you it is only a Chinese custom we keep. It's bluff, that's all."

The only thing which was not bluff was the family. The little group of relatives living so close together seemed to possess a kind of safety, an emotional security, which must have been unbelievably precious to them. Little wonder that he dismissed so much as bluff when the lives of so many, including members of his family, were based entirely upon makeshift.

It was the first time I had ever been made to feel desperately alone, because it was the first time I had lived so close to people, fifteen of them in one small room of one small house. Before, when able to withdraw from people, it was possible to come to terms with my lack of understanding and then find relief in the moments of togetherness with them. But in Chinatown there was one enormous togetherness the whole time, a togetherness which could neither be fully shared in nor understood.

Eng Teck, diffident always but nobody's fool, was not interested in anything outside the family. " What for trust other people, I don't know; they do nothing for us. It's all bluff. All bluff."

Once we went with Choon Seng in the taxi to a beach the other side of Singapore Island—six adults and five children in a Ford Prefect. On the way we passed some fine old British houses of colonial days. I asked Eng Teck what he thought of them.

" I do not know what they are like," he said, " I have never been in a big house, so how can I say?

" All I know is that we Chinese like to live all of us together in a little room. We are happy like that in our family."

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To the Bloody Editor! You want this or—?

BLOT

BY DARRELL BATES

HE HAD been successfully writing stories and serials for magazines with large circulations for twenty-three years, when he suddenly discovered at half past nine on a Sunday evening that it wasn't what he wanted to do after all.

"... And what," the girl with the purple eye-shadow and the green earrings had asked earlier that evening, "do you do?"

They were in the cellar of a sort of club somewhere in S.W.3. It was full of men with beards and women in hairy, knee-length sweaters. They had met there by chance.

"I write," he said.

"Really?" The girl widened her eyes at him in admiration and gave a deep, contour-improving sigh. "I thought from your clothes that you were a stockbroker or something, come to see how we live in Chelsea." She moved sideways like an amorous crab, and brushed him with a segment of lean hip and slippery thigh. "But you look quite prosperous ..."

"I don't do too badly," he admitted modestly.

He saw at once from her eyes that he had made a mistake. Writers, the eyes said firmly, ought to be poor. Nevertheless she had another drink, which cost five and nine, and one of his cigarettes too, and then blew the smoke into his face to show that she didn't mind too much after all about his prosperity and his clothes.

"What do you write about?" she asked.

"Well ..." He hesitated, sensing that his stock brands of Ruritanian romance and wholesome tales for wholesome children wouldn't make a good impression on this gifted, elegant creature.

"Sex, I imagine," said the girl, mistaking the reason for his hesitation. "A bit vieux jeu isn't it, but the bourgeoisie still go in for it, they say, so I suppose it pays." She puffed a smoke ring into his eyes, to show that once more he was forgiven. "Now you must tell me your name." The segment of lean hip

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and thigh moved again, like the second-hand of a station clock.

"It's Thomas," he said, "Thomas Truebody."

She smiled, at first, as if to share his little joke, but when she saw from his face that he was serious, that it really was his name, she switched off her smile, picked up the workman's canvas tool case she used for a handbag and went off to the Ladies'. She didn't even say excuse me, and she didn't come back. Thomas Truebody indeed! Whoever heard of a writer, a serious writer—a writer that a girl would want to be seen talking to—with a name like that?

It was always like that, Thomas thought ruefully; in the end the girls always went off to the Ladies'—sometimes they just turned their backs. He ordered another drink, and it was soon afterwards, with the clock at half past nine, that he suddenly realised what was wrong with his life and what it was he wanted to do instead.

His literary agent was horrified. "You can't do that! you'll—"

He was going to say, you'll ruin us. But—although in fact the firm depended largely on the ten per cent they got from Thomas' serials—the agent thought on quick reflection that it would be better not to admit it. Writers were a grasping lot, the fellow might even want to get the amount of their commission reduced. He tried another line. "You owe a duty to your public you know. You can't just abandon them. What about the present serial for instance? There are still fourteen chapters to go."

"Don't worry," said Thomas Truebody. "I'll finish that. After all, I've got to pay the rent."

The agent was very relieved. He knew the flat where Thomas lived in Brompton Square, and what the rent was. "Well, what exactly is it you want me to do?" he asked.

"I want you to send some of my short stories to *Chance* even perhaps to—" he breathed the word as if it were some awe-inspiring deity or a loved woman's name—"to *Sideways*."

"But—" *Chance* was a very specialised sort of magazine, with a small but highly sophisticated circulation. *Sideways* was the same but more so—"Do you really think they will like your sort of stories?"

"These will be different," Thomas said.

"I see," said the agent, and lit a cigarette. "They don't pay much, by the way."

"I know. But it's what I want to do."

The agent saw that it was hopeless to argue. Thomas Truebody had clearly made up his mind. The only hope now was

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that, after half a dozen rejection slips, he would see the folly of his new ambition and return meekly to writing the sort of stuff that paid.

"All right then," the agent said, "we'll see what we can do." He held out his hand and smiled. The more he thought about it the less he was worried. He was pretty sure that as soon as *Chance* saw who had written the stories they wouldn't even bother to read the text. As for *Sideways*, he doubted, when they saw who the author's agent was, whether they would even bother to open the envelope. It wouldn't be long before Thomas Truebody came to heel.

When the first story arrived the agent was quite surprised. It really was different. There were several words in it that the mass circulation magazines wouldn't have liked at all, and there were hardly any full stops. He put it in an envelope and sent it to *Chance*. It came back a week later with a printed rejection slip, but some kindly girl, or it may have been a man—it was difficult to tell with *Chance*—had written "Sorry!" underneath in ink.

"You see!" Thomas said triumphantly.

"See what?" asked the agent.

"Well . . . they wouldn't have troubled to write 'Sorry!' like that unless they were interested, would they?"

The agent grunted. He had tried unsuccessfully to write, himself, before he became a literary agent, and he knew all about rejection slips. "Very well," he said, "you do another story and we'll try again."

This time nobody wrote "Sorry!" on the printed slip. Thomas was very upset. He went home and sat up all night finishing off the remaining chapters of the romantic serial. Perhaps that was the trouble, he thought, trying to do two different sorts of writing at the same time. Once he had finished the serial he could give himself up entirely to *Chance* and *Sideways*.

But the rejection slips still kept coming in. *Sideways*, more often than not, didn't even bother to enclose a slip at all, and twice they forgot to stamp the envelope.

"It's no good," the agent said, trying to conceal his satisfaction behind a façade of sympathetic gloom. "You'd better start on another serial. What about doing one on a duke who loved a poor vicar's daughter and—"

"No," said Thomas, "I'm not going to give up."

"Very well. But, I think it would be better, both in your interests and in ours, if you sent your stories to *Chance* and so forth direct in future. I fear that our name, our solid respectable reputation may perhaps be a bar to your—er, present aspirations.

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And we— Well, they are not really our sort of stories. Some of the language . . ."

Thomas went back sorrowfully to his flat and began on another story. It started, *drip drip drip timothy watched the moisture drain like slow music from millicent's petticoat on the washing line next door*, without any capital letters or commas. At one end of his writing-table was a pile of stories which had been rejected by *Chance*. At the other was a smaller pile of his choicest, most anguished pieces which had been rejected by *Sideways*. He kept them separate. He never sent to one stories that had been rejected by the other. He didn't know why; perhaps one rejection was all that each story, or his sensitive ego could bear.

On the third Sunday in every month, for as long as he could remember, Thomas had gone to visit his aunt. Aunt Emily lived in a pretty, chintzy cottage in Suffolk with a thatched roof and hollyhocks. She did things for the Women's Institute and went to church every Sunday. The newspapers and *Country Life* were laid out neatly on the table in the drawing-room.

"Good day, Thomas," she said. "I trust you are well?" Even her speech was Edwardian.

"Yes, Aunt Emily."

"You don't look at all well to me." She took off her gardening-gloves and laid them on the table. "Let us have some tea."

Later, and quite suddenly, she said, "I'm worried about you, Thomas. You don't seem the same. You haven't been the same for several months. What, pray, is the trouble?"

Thomas nibbled at a sandwich. He would have liked to tell someone, but . . . He glanced towards the papers on the table, and *Country Life*. No, Aunt Emily simply wouldn't understand.

"Are you in debt or—" she looked at him over the top of her glasses—"in love?"

"No. It's not that."

"Then what is it?"

In the end he told her. At least the gist of it.

"And what are the names of these periodicals you wish to write for?"

"You wouldn't know them, Aunt Emily. They are rather . . ."

Aunt Emily went to a glass-fronted bookshelf. She opened the door, and one by one took the leather-bound works of Thackeray from the shelf and put them on a chair. Behind them, Thomas saw, were copies of a magazine neatly stacked. A magazine called *Chance*.

"Is this . . .?"

"Yes," said Thomas. He didn't know what else to say.

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"You see," Aunt Emily said, "I have meetings of the Women's Institute in here. And sometimes the vicar calls . . ."

"Yes," said Thomas again, "I see."

"And you say," she went on, "that you've tried again and again without success?"

"Yes, Aunt Emily. Again and again."

"Poor boy!" Thomas, who was forty-three, was used to it by now. "Tell me, do you use your own name for these stories?"

"Yes, of course. I'm not ashamed of them."

"I know. But have you noticed—" She picked up one of the volumes and turned the pages—"that none of the articles or the stories and the poems in *Chance* are by people with ordinary names? Look. Tilde Lipowski, Adoye Adikobe, Stephan Sik. Ah yes, here's one which might be English, but even that is rather . . ."

"Barbara Bitch," Thomas said. "Yes. She's a regular contributor."

"Well," said Aunt Emily, pouring him another cup of tea, "it would have the advantage too, wouldn't it, Thomas, that if you did get something accepted I wouldn't know it was by you, would I?"

All the way back in the train Thomas wrestled with his conscience and his thoughts. It wouldn't be honest . . . it wouldn't be right . . . it shouldn't make any difference . . .

In the end he decided to call himself Blot.

At Liverpool Street Station, instead of taking a taxi to Brompton Square as he usually did, he went by bus to the Fulham Road. Eventually on a postcard displayed on a board outside a tobacconist's he found what he wanted. ATTIC, SHARE LAV, 50/-, it said. He wasn't sure yet whether he was ready to go all the way and actually live there. What he wanted, like a new property development company, was a good address.

Two days later Thomas sat at a small grease-stained table in his attic. Only he wasn't Thomas Truebody any more. He was Blot. He was revising the typescript of the *drip drip* story. He made several changes. It was extraordinary what a difference being in the attic made. Halfway through the afternoon he went out, still in his dark, well-cut suit and bought a pair of jeans and a pink Italian shirt.

He finished revising the story at two o'clock in the morning.

drip drip drip, it went now, *timothy watched the moisture ooze like mute music from milika's moujiks on the washing line next door.* On an impulse he signed it with a splodge of ink, and made his covering letter brief and arrogant.

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From Blot, attic of 12a Alma Terrace, to the Bloody Editor of Chance, you want this or shall I send it to America?

He rubbed and dirtied the envelope on the floor, put on a penny instead of a threepenny stamp and then walked to the Fulham Road and put it in the postbox.

Not only did *Chance* accept the story, they sent him a five-shilling book of stamps as well. " Do," they said, " send us some more. We are etiolated, *absolutely etiolated*, by the sombre colour of your work. It has . . ." Thomas had to turn to a dictionary to unravel several of the nouns and adjectives of praise they used. Next day he terminated the lease of his flat in Brompton Square and bought himself a pair of Swedish sandals.

Thus encouraged Thomas picked out the first of the stories he had sent months and months ago to *Chance*, made a few alterations in green pencil, added one or two obscene drawings in the margin and sent it off to the Editor of *Sideways*. They reproduced a copy of one of the most mutilated pages of the typescript when they printed the story the following month.

In the course of the next six months he sold to *Chance* all the stories he had written in his Brompton Square days for *Sideways*, and *Sideways* swallowed all that *Chance* had rejected from the pen of Thomas Truebody. Once, just for fun, Thomas sent to *Chance* one of the stories they had previously rejected. " An early Blot," he called it in his covering letter. Either they didn't remember or they hadn't read it the first time but they printed the story in their Christmas number.

" . . . And what," said the girl with the purple eye-shadow and the green earrings, " do you do? "

They were in the cellar of a sort of club somewhere in S.W.3. A year had passed, more or less, and again they had met by chance.

" I write," Thomas said.

" I thought so." The eyes widened and there was another contour-improving sigh. " I thought so from the way you dress. But," she added, " haven't we met somewhere? "

" I doubt it," he said, closing the subject like a book that had been read before.

" What do you write about? " A segment of lean hip and slippery thigh brushed against him.

" Sadism," he said, " and sweat."

" Yes," she said. " I knew it somehow. I felt it here, and—" she moved her hand from her heart to her armpit—" here."

Thomas turned away and ordered another drink.

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"And now," the girl said breathlessly, "you must tell me your name."

"Blot," said Thomas, without turning his head.

"*The* Blot, the one who writes for *Chance* and . . ."

"Yes," said Thomas, over his shoulder. He bent down, removed one of his sandals and examined a fastening that was loose.

"Oh!" She reached over his shoulder and took the sandal, "Let me mend it for you. At my little place. I'm terribly good at fastening things and—" again the segment of hip and thigh moved towards him like the hand of a station clock—"at unfastening them, too."

As they moved off down the Fulham Road Thomas smiled at himself, or perhaps it was at the shadow of Blot on the pavement in front of him that he smiled. He was poor and unwashed, and rather hungry.

But with the purple eye-shadow and the green earrings beside him he knew that at last he had arrived.

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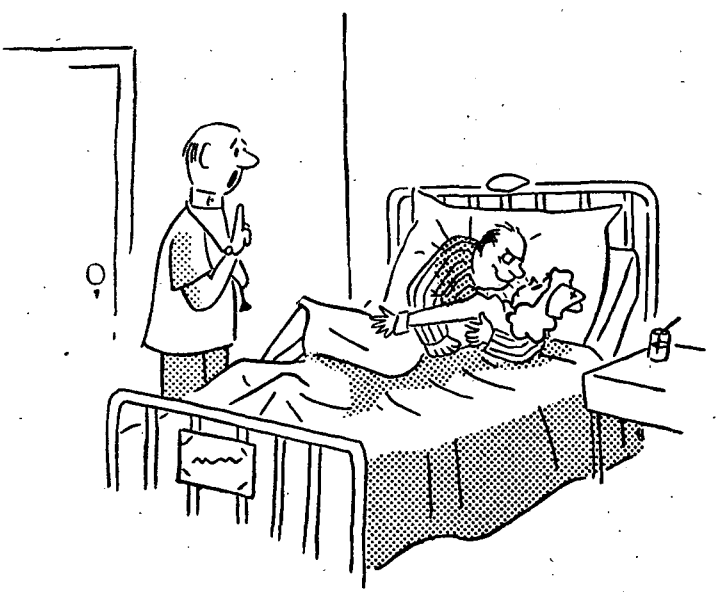

"You mustn't attempt to do too much the first day, Mr. Mulcraft."

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Three bottles of pop, and summertime for ever ahead

HOLIDAY

BY RAY BRADBURY

IT WAS a day as fresh as grass growing up and clouds going over and butterflies coming down could make it. It was a day compounded of silences of bee and flower and ocean and land, which were not silences at all, but motions, stirs, flutters, risings, fallings, each in their own time and matchless rhythm. The land did not move, but moved. The sea was not still, yet was still. Paradox flowed into paradox, stillness mixed with stillness, sound with sound. The flowers vibrated and the bees fell in separate and small showers of golden rain on the clover.

The seas of hill and the seas of ocean were divided, each from the other's motion, by a railroad track, empty, compounded of rust and iron marrow, a track on which, quite obviously, no train had run in many years. Thirty miles north it swirled on away to farther mists of distance, thirty miles south it tunnelled islands of cloud shadows that changed their continental positions on the sides of far mountains as you watched.

Now, suddenly, the railway track began to tremble.

A blackbird, standing on the rail, felt a rhythm grow faintly, miles away, like a heart beginning to beat.

The blackbird leapt up over the sea.

The rail continued to vibrate softly until at long last around a curve and along the shore came a small workman's handcar, its two-cylinder engine popping and spluttering in the great silence.

On top of this small four-wheeled car, on a double-sided bench facing in two directions and with a little surrey roof above for shade, sat a man, his wife and their small seven-year-old son. As the handcar travelled through lonely stretch after lonely stretch, the wind whipped their eyes and blew their hair, but they did not look back but only ahead. Sometimes they looked eagerly, as a curve unwound itself; sometimes with great sadness, but always watchful, ready for the next scene.

As a new level opened out, the machine's engine gasped and stopped abruptly. In the now crushing silence, it seemed that the quiet of the earth, sky and sea itself, by its friction, brought the car to a wheeling halt.

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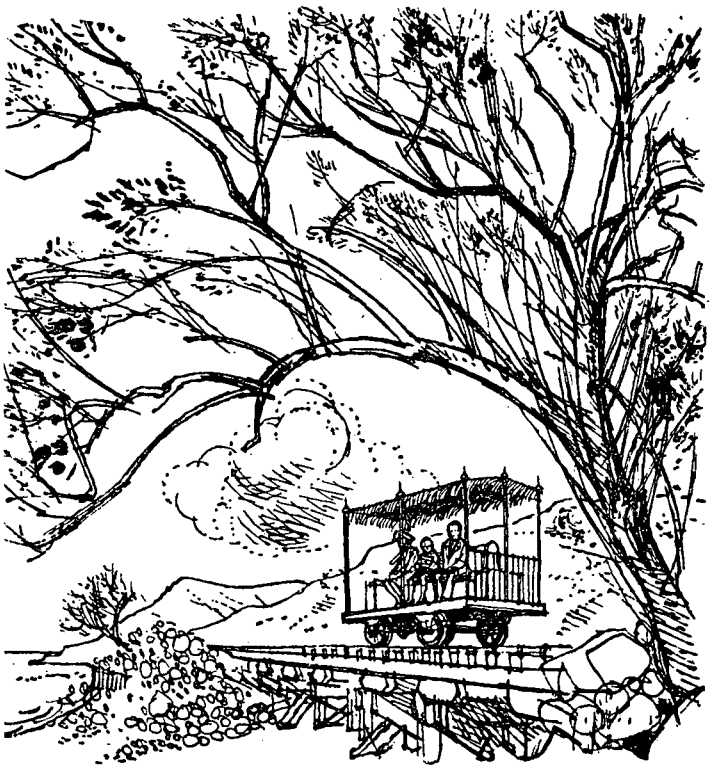

" Out of fuel." The man, sighing, reached for the extra can in the small storage bin and began to pour it into the tank.

His wife and son sat quietly looking at the sea, listening to the muted thunder, the whisper, the drawing back of huge tapestries of sand, gravel, green weed, and foam.

" Isn't the sea nice? " said the woman.

" I like it," said the boy.

" Shall we picnic here, while we're at it? "

The man focused binoculars on the green peninsula ahead.

" Might as well. The rails have rusted badly. There's a break ahead. We may have to wait while I set a few back in place."

" As many as there are," said the boy, " we'll have picnics! "

The woman tried to smile at this, then turned her grave attention to the man. " How far have we come today? "

" Not ninety miles." The man still peered through the glasses,

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squinting. "I don't like to go farther than that any one day, anyway. If you rush, there's no time to see. We'll reach Monterey the day after tomorrow, Palo Alto the next day, if you want."

The woman removed her great shadowing straw hat which had been tied over her golden hair with a bright yellow ribbon, and stood perspiring faintly, away from the machine. They had ridden so steadily on the shuddering rail car that the motion was sewn in their bodies. Now, with the stopping, they felt odd, on the verge of unravelling.

"Let's eat!"

The boy ran with the wicker lunch basket down to the shore.

The boy and the woman were already seated by a spread tablecloth when the man came down to them, dressed in his business suit and waistcoat and tie and hat as if he expected to meet someone along the way. As he dealt out the sandwiches and exhumed the pickles from their cool green Mason jars, he began to loosen his tie and unbutton his waistcoat, always looking round as if he should be careful and ready to button up again.

"Are we all alone, Papa?" said the boy, eating.

"Yes."

"No one else, anywhere?"

"No one else."

"Were there people before?"

"Why do you keep asking that? It wasn't that long ago. Just a few months. You remember?"

"Almost. If I try hard, then I don't remember at all." The boy let a handful of sand fall through his fingers. "Were there as many people as there is sand here on the beach? What *happened* to them?"

"I don't know," the man said, and it was true . . .

They had wakened one morning and the world was empty. The neighbour's clothesline was still strung with blowing white wash, cars gleamed in front of other seven a.m. cottages, but there were no farewells, the city did not hum with its mighty arterial traffics, phones did not alarm themselves, children did not wail in sunflower wildernesses.

Only the night before he and his wife had been sitting on the front porch when the evening paper was delivered and, not even daring to open it to see the headlines, he had said, "I wonder when He will get tired of us and just rub us all out?"

"It has gone pretty far," she said. "On and on. We're such fools, aren't we?"

"Wouldn't it be nice—" he lit his pipe and puffed it—"if we

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woke tomorrow and everyone in the world was gone and everything was starting over again?" He sat smoking, the paper folded in his hand, his head resting back on the chair.

"If you could press a button right now and make it happen, would you?"

"I think I would," he said. "Nothing violent. Just have everyone vanish off the face of the earth. Just leave the land and the sea and the growing things like flowers and grass and fruit trees. And the animals, of course, let them stay. Everything except man, who hunts when he isn't hungry, eats when full, and is mean when no one's bothered him."

"Naturally," she smiled quietly, "we would be left."

"I'd like that," he mused. "All of time ahead. The longest summer holiday in history. And us out for the longest picnic-basket lunch in memory. Just you, me and Jim. No commuting. No keeping up with the Joneses. Not even a car. I'd like to find another way of travelling, an older way . . . Then, a hamper full of sandwiches, three bottles of pop, pick up supplies where you need them from empty grocery stores in empty towns, and summertime for ever up ahead . . ."

They sat a long while on the porch in silence, the newspaper folded between them.

At last she spoke.

"Wouldn't we be *lonely*?" she said.

So that's how it was the morning of the first day of the new world. They had awakened to the soft sounds of an earth that was now no more than a meadow, and the cities of the earth sinking back into seas of sabre grass, marigold, marguerite, and morning-glory. They had taken it with remarkable calm at first, perhaps because they had not liked the city for so many years and had had so many friends who were not truly friends, and had lived a boxed and separate life of their own within a mechanical hive.

The husband rose and looked out of the window and observed very calmly, as if it were a weather condition, "Everyone's gone . . ." knowing this just by the sounds the city had ceased to make.

They took their time over breakfast, for the boy was still asleep, and then the husband sat back and said, "Now I must plan what to do."

"Do? Why, why you'll go to work, of course."

"You still don't believe it, do you?" he laughed. "That I won't be rushing off each day at eight-ten, that Jim won't go to school again ever. School's out for all of us! No more pencils, no more books, no more sassy looks from the boss! We're let

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out, darling, and we'll never come back to the silly damn dull routines. Come on!"

And he had walked her through the still and empty city streets.

"They didn't die," he said. "They just . . . went away."

"What about the other cities?"

He went to an outdoor phone booth and dialled Chicago, then New York, then San Francisco.

Silence. Silence. Silence.

"That's it," he said, replacing the receiver.

"I feel guilty," she said. "They gone and we here. And . . . I feel happy. Why? I should be unhappy."

"Should you? It's no tragedy. They weren't tortured or blasted or burned. It went easily and they didn't know. And now we owe nothing to anyone. Our only responsibility is being happy. Thirty more years of happiness, wouldn't that be good?"

"But then we must have more children!"

"To repopulate the world?" He shook his head slowly, calmly. "No. Let Jim be the last. After he's grown and gone let the horses and cows and ground squirrels and garden spiders have the world. They'll get on. And someday some other species that can combine a natural happiness with a natural curiosity will build cities that won't even look like cities to us, and survive. Right now, let's pack a basket, wake Jim, and get going on that long thirty-year summer holiday. I'll beat you to the house!" . . .

He took a sledge-hammer from the small rail car and while he worked alone for half-an-hour fixing the rusted rails into place, the woman and the boy ran along the shore. They came back with dripping shells, a dozen or more, and some beautiful pink pebbles, and sat, and the boy took schooling from the mother, doing homework on a pad with a pencil for a time; and then at high noon the man came down, his coat off, his tie thrown aside, and they drank orange pop, watching the bubbles surge up, glutting, inside the bottles. It was quiet. They listened to the sun tune the old iron rails. The smell of hot tar on the sleepers moved about them in the salt wind, as the husband tapped his map lightly and gently.

"We'll go to Sacramento next month, May, then work up towards Seattle. Should make that by July first; July's a good month in Washington—then back down as the weather cools, to Yellowstone, a few miles a day, hunt here, fish there . . ."

The boy, bored, moved away to throw sticks in the sea and wade out like a dog to retrieve them.

The man went on, "Winter in Tucson, then part of the winter,

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moving on towards Florida, up the coast in the spring, and maybe New York by June. Two years from now, Chicago in the summer. Winter, three years from now, what about Mexico City? Anywhere the rails lead us, anywhere at all, and if we come to an old offshoot rail line we don't know anything about, what the hell, we'll just take it, go down it to see where it goes. And some year we'll boat down the Mississippi, always wanted to do that. Enough to last us a lifetime. And that's just how long I want to take to do it all . . ." His voice faded.

He started to fumble the map shut, but before he could move, a bright thing fell through the air and hit the paper. It rolled off into the sand and made a wet lump.

His wife glanced at the wet place in the sand and then swiftly searched his face. His solemn eyes were too bright. And down one cheek was a track of wetness.

She gasped. She took his hand and held it tight.

He clenched her hand very hard, his eyes shut now, and slowly he said, with difficulty, "Wouldn't it be nice if we went to sleep tonight and in the night, somehow, it all came back. All the foolishness, all the noise, all the hate, all the terrible things, all the nightmares, all the wicked people and stupid children, all the mess, all the smallness, all the confusion, all the hope, all the need, all the love. Wouldn't it be nice?"

She waited and nodded her head once.

Then both of them started.

For standing between them, they knew not for how long, was their son, an empty pop bottle in one hand.

The boy's face was pale. With his free hand he reached out to touch his father's cheek where the single tear had made its track.

"You," he said. "Oh, Dad, you. You haven't anyone to play with, either . . ."

The wife started to speak.

The husband moved to take the boy's hand.

The boy jerked back. "Silly! Oh, silly! Silly fools! Oh, you dumb, dumb!" And, whirling, he rushed down to the ocean and stood there crying loudly.

The wife rose to follow, but the husband stopped her. "No. Let him."

And then they both grew cold and quiet. For the boy, below on the shore, crying steadily now, was writing on a piece of paper and stuffing it into the pop bottle and ramming the tin cap back on and taking the bottle and giving it a great glittering heave up in the air and out into the tidal sea.

What, thought the wife, what did he write on the note? What's in the bottle?

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The bottle moved out in the waves.

The boy stopped crying.

After a long while he walked up the shore to stand looking at his parents. His face was neither bright nor dark, alive nor dead, eager nor resigned; it seemed a curious mixture that simply made do with time, weather, and these people.

They looked at him and beyond to the bay where the bottle, containing the scribbled note, was almost out of sight now, shining in the waves.

Did he write what *we* wanted? thought the woman; did he write what he heard us just wish, just say?

Or did he write something for only himself? she wondered, that tomorrow he might wake and find himself alone in an empty world, no one around, no man, no woman, no father, no mother, no fool grown-ups with fool wishes, so he could trudge up to the railroad tracks and take the handcar motoring, a solitary boy, across the continental wilderness, on eternal voyages and picnics?

Is that what he wrote in the note?

Which?

She searched his colourless eyes, could not read the answer; dared not ask.

Gull shadows sailed over and kited their faces with sudden passing coolness.

"Time to go," someone said.

They loaded the wicker basket on to the rail car. The woman tied her large bonnet securely in place with its yellow ribbon, they set the boy's pail of shells on the floorboards, then the husband put on his tie, his coat, his hat, and they all sat on the bench of the car looking out at the sea where the bottled note was far out, blinking on the horizon.

"Is asking enough?" said the boy. "Does wishing work?"

"Sometimes . . . too well."

"It depends on what you ask for."

The boy nodded, his eyes far away.

They looked back at where they had come from, and then ahead to where they were going.

"Good-bye, place," said the boy, and waved.

The car rolled down the rusty rails. The sound of it dwindled, faded. The man, the woman, the boy dwindled with it in the distance, among the hills.

After they were gone, the rail trembled faintly for two minutes and ceased. A flake of rust fell. A flower nodded.

The sea was very loud.

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THE OPPOSITE SEX

BY LAURIE LEE

IT WASN'T the discovery of sex that affected my life so much as the first occasion that I met it head on.

I don't think I ever discovered sex, it seemed to be always there—a vague pink streak running back through the landscape as far as I can remember. This was probably due to my country upbringing, where life was open as a cucumber-frame, and sex a constant force like the national grid, occasionally boosted by thundery weather. There were the free, unpackaged animals and birds, constantly proving their tireless urges, all coolly encouraged and pandered to as one of the parish's more profitable drives. My childhood was cluttered with fumbling bees, loaded udders, and swelling fruit, with bellowing livestock, hypnotised hens, and bulls being led by the nose. Sex in the country was like grain in the wood, self-renewing as the daily paper, never obsessive, nor crowding the attention, but always going on if you cared to look for it.

So the twisted shock of a sudden sex-dawning was not a problem I was asked to bear. My moment, after years of lazily inspecting the pitch, came when I was suddenly called on to play. There had, of course, been early practice at the nets, some of it solitary, though not without promise. Then the occasion arrived when I actually stood at the crease, bat in hand, ready to strip the willow.

I couldn't have been more than fifteen at the time—I remember I had just left school. Our small Cotswold village was crammed with boys of my age, all coming to a head together—loose rangey

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lads, overgrown like weeds, top-heavy and multi-branched. We all seemed to steam or give off fumes like a furnace, heated more than we were wont to be heated, and as there were few cars or motor-bikes to talk about, we were free to concentrate on sex.

Sex, and our questionable success at it, was the only status we sought, though virginity at that age, in spite of our boasted loss of it, was honoured more in the evasion than in the breach. So we squatted together in our rain-dark shed, painting the walls with our gaudy lies, playing competitive fantasies one against the other until we believed ourselves veterans.

Then one evening, walking home from one such gathering, I lost its cosy half-world for ever. In a field near the vicarage, in a moment of terror and truth, I was confronted by a whole live girl. She stood in the grass, supposedly unaware, twitching her eyes like a grazing animal, indolently angling her flanks to the hunter and closely watching me sideways.

I recognised her as a girl from a neighbouring village, a girl called Ellie, whom I'd known since a child. But she'd never directly looked at me before, and so I'd never really seen her. Seeing her now, brushing the grass with her hand, I was suddenly stung by brutish ambition. I thought of carrying this trophy back to the shed, laying it warm and real on the stones. I thought of the lads crowding round in a sudden miracle of silence. I also thought of Rudolph.

Rudolph was my closest friend at the time, and we used each other as whetstones. He was a year older than I; a thin, shifty lad who seemed specially constructed for scuttling down holes. We had competed together since we were infants and sucked the blood of each other's jealousies. Rudolph must see this, I thought to myself. He wouldn't believe it otherwise.

" Seen any snakes? " asked Ellie.

I made no reply, but strode past her, mournfully whistling. I was wearing my brother's plus-fours and woollen stockings and the grass bounced off my legs like blow-darts.

The next day I steered Rudolph up to the vicarage fields, and sure enough she was there again. But this time she was draped across the top of the stile so that there was no way of getting past her. She lay sprawled across it, her knees to her chin, a languorous and weighty road-block.

" Oo's 'er? " muttered Rudolph, pulling up fast.

" I dunno," I said, on needles.

" Some Bisley bird. Let's clip 'er earhole."

" O.K. Let's clip 'er earhole."

Large, beautiful, with Spanish hair and eyes, skin tight with flesh as an apple, Ellie slipped from the stile and faced us boldly,

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smiling a slow, fat smile. I watched her closely as her eyes moved over us, heavy-lidded as a sleepy owl. Her lazy gaze finally rested on Rudolph. It was an excruciating moment of doubt.

"Push off, you," she murmured.

Rudolph didn't argue; he gave a thin dry cough and went.

I was alone with the girl in a smell of warm rain, feeling handsome, jaunty and chosen. Ellie stood thigh-deep in the glittering grass like a half-submerged tropic idol.

"Lift us up on that wall, come on," she said. "I'm dead scared of things in the grass."

My hands sunk deep into her open armpits and she rose in the air like a bird. I wouldn't have believed it, or that I could do it, it was like lifting a healthy eagle.

The flat stone wall, backed by a twisted beech, seemed wider than any bed. We lay cradled together in its dusty silence looking down at the running grass.

"'Ow's yer cousin?" said Ellie. "We've 'ad some laughs. 'Er an' me. We thought we'd choke."

One side of my body was hot against her, the other was creeping cold.

"Oh!—I'm falling." She turned and held me—and I sank into a smell of doughnuts.

Holding this girl was advanced stuff indeed. She was sixteen and worked in the cake shop. She was more grown-up than any girl I'd yet touched—the others had only been children. Yet suddenly, enveloped in her great bare arms, the raciness went out of the encounter, her chatter quietened to almost maternal whispers, became little sounds of content and comfort.

I forgot the cowshed and the cowshed boys. Ellie was a revolution—a brimming generosity heaving with uncertainties and rounder than all my imaginings. So silent now, her wordless lips to my ear, her warm breadth turned towards me, she became not an adventure but a solemn need. Even Rudolph went out of my mind . . .

The June twilight came down and we disentangled our hair. The wall narrowed as we drew apart. Ellie's crumpled blue dress had moss in the folds like crevices filled with birds' nests.

"Look what I got," she said, fishing behind the wall. She produced a bag full of crusty doughnuts. "We won't need no supper. I get 'em from work. I live on 'em practically." She gave me one and sank her teeth into another. "You're a boy all right," she said. "You got a nerve." She took another deep bite, and her teeth came out red with jam.

I couldn't forget Ellie after that, and there were vivid dreams at night, when her great brown body and crusty roundness

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became half girl and half groceries. My sleep knew the touch of gritty sugar on the lips and the crisp skin fresh from the bakery, enclosing who knew what stores of sweet dough, or what light dabs of jam hidden deep . . .

I began to meet Ellie at frequent intervals, though I looked for her all the time. Perhaps a week would go by without seeing her, then she would suddenly pop up in the lane. "Ah, there's my boy," she'd say with a gurgle, and lead me away through the nettles. In the nests we made among the hedges, or in the quarries above the Severn, we lay innocently enough for hours together, eating each other or eating cakes.

I was oblivious now to the normal world and remote from its small affairs. Occasionally we were shadowed by some cowshed boys, but they might just as well have been sheep. Once or twice I saw Rudolph watching us sharply through a hedge, but I felt neither pity nor anger . . .

Then one evening Ellie leaned from her moving bus and called she had something to tell me. As soon as we met, on our frontier between villages, I could see that something was up. She'd done her hair a new way, in great piled-up coils, and her smile was bulging with secrets.

She said her mum and dad had gone away for a week and left her in charge of the house. To prove it, she opened the neck of her dress and produced a door key large as a trowel. It was going to be lovely; she'd move down from the attic and sleep in the big brass bed. She'd be all by herself, just her and the cat. So I'd best not go near her, had I?

For the next couple of days I was quiet with decision, though I shook whenever I thought about it. What I had to do seemed so inevitable that I felt almost noble, like being called to war. But I took my time; I was older now, I thought I'd better not act like a savage. When the third night came, remote and still, I knew it must be the one. With the family in bed, I stole out of the house and lifted my bicycle over the gate.

I rode up the hill through waves of warm moonlight and crossed the common between our villages. I took long deep breaths, feeling heavy with destiny, going proud and melancholy to my task, wondering all the time, with salt on my tongue, whether I'd be changed when I returned this way, and thinking of the dark locked house at the end of my journey, with its enclosed and waiting girl.

Ellie's place stood alone at the edge of the village, a little way down a cart-track. It was silent, lampless, heavily loaded with moonlight and as pretty as one could wish. I buried my

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bicycle in a growth of nettles and crept sweating into the garden. I didn't pause for a moment to wonder what I was up to, every act seemed ordained by legend.

I saw the open window above my head and started climbing the spout towards it. A roosting bird scurried out of a gutter, but I climbed boldly, alarming nature. What would happen when I leapt light-footed into the room and confronted the sleeping girl? Would she gasp with pleasure and open her arms, cry for mercy, or lose her reason?

I reached the window, and a wave of warm air, scented with Ellie, flowed out to greet me. I straddled the sill, wriggled my way through the casement, avoided a flowerpot, and I was in.

As my feet touched the floor I saw the moonlit bed and the white breathing weight of the girl. Her bare sleeping arms were like shining rivers, her nightdress like drifts of ice, and her long dark locks, coiled loose on the pillow, were deep canyons carving the Alps. More beautiful and mysterious than ever I'd seen her, achingly remote and magic; all cockiness left me—I wanted to kneel to her then, first to worship, and then to love.

A floorboard creaked. Ellie sighed and stirred, then dreamily turned towards me.

"Oh, no!" she gurgled. "Not *you* again, really! Rudolph, you bad, bad boy . . ."

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HOME FROM ABROAD

Far-fetched with tales of other worlds and ways,
My skin well-oiled with wines of the Levant,
I set my face into a filial smile
To greet the pale, domestic kiss of Kent.

But shall I never learn? That gawky girl,
Recalled so primly in my foreign thoughts,
Becomes again the green-haired queen of love
Whose wanton form dilates as it delights.

Her rolling tidal landscape floods the eye
And drowns Chianti in a dusky stream;
The flower-flecked grasses swim with simple horses,
The hedges choke with roses fat as cream.

So do I breathe the hayblown airs of home,
And watch the sea-green elms drip birds and shadows,
And as the twilight nets the plunging sun
My heart's keel slides to rest among the meadows.

LAURIE LEE

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Horse Sense

Boys will be boys; and hosses—well, hosses is hosses!
BRET HARTE, *Chiquita*

I's boun' to see my gal tonight—
Oh, lone de way, my dearie!
De moon ain't out, de stars ain't bright—
Oh, lone de way, my dearie!
Dis hoss o' mine is pow'rful slow,
But when I does git to yo' do'
Yo' kiss'll pay me back, an' mo',
Dough lone de way, my dearie.
PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR, *On the Road*

Head over Heels

I now looked up at my rescuer . . . He gave me a sort of shake, the way a dog shakes a sock, and said, " Don't you know you oughtn't to go near their heels? "

I said, " No, I didn't know. I am an American."

" They have horses there, don't they? " the giant said.

I said, " Certainly, the police do, and very nice horses they are too, and I never heard of them kicking anyone . . . not deliberately, I mean." I gave the rear end of the horse a dirty look.

" Well," he said, " don't go near strange horses like that again." He was quite severe . . .

" You'd better come with me, and I'll teach you how not to get hurt when you handle horses."

I had no intention of handling horses, but he was very attractive so I followed him quite meekly . . .
REHNA CLOETE, *To Catch a Man*

This love of mine

Little she cared, save to be by my side,
To ride with me, and ever to ride . . .
She was as bold as the billows that beat,
She was as wild as the breezes that blow;
From her little head to her little feet,
She was swayed in her suppleness to and fro . . .
FRANK DESPREZ, *Lasca*

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On her high Horse

" The silly little fool's been having tantrums while you've been away . . . she's announced that she wants to go back to Venice . . . Anyway, by way of precaution I've given orders that no horse is to be saddled for her under any circumstances."

" In her own interest! " Luciano exclaimed nervously.

" In her own interest? " Sabina exploded. " In yours, you mean. If you hadn't had me here, she would very likely have been gone already, and then you would have had to gallop after her! . . . Just you go and tell her, my lad, that, instead of leaving for Venice, today, she'll be going to Florence with your grandmother tomorrow or the day after."

" But suppose she doesn't want to? "

Sabina wondered whether her old ears had heard aright.

" Suppose she doesn't want to? She wants what you want. Unless you ask her first what she wants, then she'll want what she thinks will irritate you most."

JOHAN FABRICIUS, *Mortal Pageant*

" One kiss, my bonny sweetheart, I'm after a prize tonight,
But I shall be back with the yellow gold before the morning light;
Yet, if they press me sharply, and harry me through the day,
Then look for me by moonlight,
Watch for me by moonlight,
I'll come to thee by moonlight, though hell should bar the way! "

He rose upright in the stirrups; he scarce could reach her hand,
But she loosened her hair i' the casement! His face burned like a brand
As the black cascade of perfume came tumbling over his breast;
And he kissed its waves in the moonlight,
Oh, sweet black waves in the moonlight!
Then he tugged at his rein in the moonlight, and galloped away to the west.

ALFRED NOYES, *The Highwayman*

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They beguiled the lazy days by mounting their ponies and riding around the camp . . . little luxuries, of which they had been deprived for months, were obtainable from the kindly custodian of the Government supply wagon.

"What's that you're hiding?" Danie asked Marietjie one evening as they rode back from a visit to the laager.

"Soap," she said . . . She thrust it deep into her pocket. "Tonight, when we've eaten, I'm going down to the pool. I'm going to wash myself from head to foot, for hours and hours."

"A frog will jump," he said, "and you'll scream—and come running back. I know girls."

"No, you'll chase the frogs away first."

"Is that all you want me for?" he asked, a prickle of excitement in his veins. "For chasing frogs!"

"What else?" With studied casualness she ran her fingers through the pony's mane . . . he could discern the apricot warmth of blood in her tanned cheeks.

ROBIN COLLINS, *The Four Coloured Flag*

Spurs to Love

He started up to see me, and he ran with cry and bound,
And drew me from my palfrey white, and set me on the ground:
He clasp't me round the middle small, he kissed me on the cheek
His voice was like the running brook when he began to speak
"O I will mount thy palfrey white, and ride to kirk with thee,
And by those sweetly shining eyes we twain will wedded be!"
Back we gallop'd, never stopping, he before and I behind,
And the autumn leaves were dropping, red and yellow in the wind
And we saw the kirk before us, as we trotted down the fells,
And nearer, clearer, o'er us, rang the welcome of the bells!

ROBERT BUCHANAN, *The Green Gnome*

House parties—whether given under the guise of shooting, hunting, fishing, or indeed any kind of sport, blood or otherwise—were always hotbeds of matrimonial plotting and scheming, even in the Middle Ages. Why do you think they had those drawbridges? To prevent the bachelor from taking to his steed and galloping away unscathed . . .

HERALD FROY, *How to Avoid Matrimony*

It was a young maiden went forth to ride,
And there was a wooer to pace by her side,
His horse was so little, and hers so high,
He thought his angel was up in the sky.

THOMAS HOOD, *Equestrian Courtship*

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They stood staring, first at the paper then at each other

TIME TO BE GOING

BY ELIZABETH LEMARCHAND

THOSE sudden, remorselessly detailed flashbacks of visual memory—something must trigger them off. Their utter irrelevance is startling, but only apparent. Much more disquieting is the implication of hidden, unbreakable chains, binding the self of now to the self of then. There must be so many of these chains which never become live, and then there are the longer ones running back far beyond the individual life span, and generating flashbacks incapable of recognition but not of stimulating response. The young Methodist minister thought there was another set, too, linking present and future. But I am anticipating . . .

A devilishly subtle clue for 14 Across trembled on the tip of Mr. Laverton's pen, but was shattered by the harsh, bisyllabic insistence of the telephone. He got up reluctantly and went out of his study into the hall.

"Snook end Mitchell," said a bright, refined voice. "We shell be delivering your fewell this efternoon. Allrrright?"

"What time?" demanded Hugh Laverton unnecessarily, in an attempt to assert himself.

"Jest a moment," said the voice. "I thenk our lurry should reach yew ebout faive, shell we say?"

"Thanks."

He put down the receiver, and stood for a moment wrinkling his brow as he tried to remember the procedure involved. The wretched stuff would turn up on Beccy's afternoon out . . . He must unlock the chute, and later on keep an ear open for the back-door bell.

I'll do it now, he thought, and went into the kitchen. His tea tray was laid ready, the food covered with a clean cloth, and the teapot and caddy standing a little apart on the table. He picked up a note headed, "Sir."

"Your chicken and salad in refridge," it said, "and summer pudding."

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The kitchen was immaculate, the chute key on its allotted nail. The white heat of a blazing August afternoon struck up at him as he opened the back door and stepped out into the lane. Having unlocked the chute and peered unprofitably into the blackness below he returned to the cool of the house and the evolution of a clue to 14 Across.

Since retiring from the City Librarianship of the flourishing county town of Stanchester, Hugh Laverton had turned a lifelong addiction to crossword puzzles into a profitable hobby. He composed them, at varying levels of intricacy, for several highbrow weeklies and monthlies. The checking of the more obscure references maintained agreeable links with the City Library, and with his successor whom he liked. Reasonably well-off, Laverton continued to live in the small Georgian terrace house to which he and his wife had come thirty years earlier, and where she had died at the beginning of 1947.

They had brought Beccy—Rebecca Easterbrook—with them, and she had stayed ever since. Directed to work of national importance during the war, she had contrived to satisfy the authorities by doing daily domestic duty at the City Hospital, while continuing to live with them. After Mrs. Laverton's death she had automatically assumed the status of working housekeeper, and was now fifty-five. Hugh Laverton was the kind of man—intelligent, placid, and invariably pleasant—for whom things tend to work out smoothly.

At about a quarter past five, he was roused by thundering on the back door. A genial giant in dungarees looked taken aback as he presented a grimy envelope.

"Beccy b'ain't poorly, be 'er, zur?"

"It's her afternoon out. I've unlocked the chute for you. She's trained me well, you know."

The giant roared, slapped his thigh, and adjured his mate to get cracking. Hugh stood in the kitchen, counting the succession of little avalanches. Hoarse conversation and sounds of jabbing and poking separated the last two.

"All aboard?" he asked, emerging into the lane.

"That's the lot, zur. Tight fit it wur. You'm pretty well full up."

A couple of coins chinked. "Thank *you*, zur."

Fetching his tea tray from the study, and stacking the crockery on the draining board, Hugh reflected that, within a limited circle, Beccy was someone. She occupied an undisputed niche. She was housekeeper to one gentleman of local standing, with no mistress of the house to claim a divided authority. Perhaps this was the basis of her apparent contentment with life. He

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was sufficiently aware that he possessed a rare period-piece to appreciate his good fortune.

Shortly after half past nine that evening he heard Beccy moving about in the kitchen, and presently she appeared bearing a tray on which was a decanter of whisky and a siphon of sodawater.

"The coal came after tea, Beccy," he said, putting down his book.

She halted midway across the room. "It didn't, sir! Would you believe it, just the one afternoon I'm out, disturbing you at your work?"

He was half amused at the dismay on her face. As always, she had covered her off-duty frock with a spotless white overall before entering the study. Her greying hair, brushed severely back from a broad brow, was confined in a smooth, tight bun. She had good eyes, he thought, although they were rather protruding. Large and light blue, they regarded him anxiously.

"It didn't disturb me for long. I found the key in its proper place, unlocked the chute and remembered to count the sacks. Twenty. The man said he could hardly get it in. I suppose we had more than usual left over from last winter?"

Something in her bearing registered indignation. "Was it a great big fellow, sir, with a red face? I know that one: he'd say anything but his prayers! Couldn't get it into our beautiful big cellar, indeed! I hope you didn't overtip him, sir?"

"I don't think so. It was an awful hot day for humping coal, poor beggars. Well, another couple of weeks and we'll both be off for our holidays, Beccy."

"That's right sir. Not but what I'm always glad to be back again, getting ready for the winter. One thing, the fuel's safely behind us now. I'll say good night then—if there's nothing more you're wanting, sir?"

A fortnight later Hugh Laverton flew out to Switzerland with an old friend for his annual walking holiday in the Alps. He was still remarkably fit and enjoyed long mountain tramps. The September days were shortening but the weather was clear and exhilarating, and the crowds had largely departed. This year the two men made Mürren their headquarters.

"Rum how this sort of life completely blots out one's normal round," his companion remarked as they made their way homewards through Trachsellauenen late one afternoon.

Hugh grunted in contented assent. As he did so, he remembered how, earlier in the day, there had flashed into his mind a brief but vivid picture of Beccy, standing in the study with the whisky tray and talking about coal. Why his contemplation of

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the Breithorn Glacier had evoked it, he could not imagine. It faded from his mind as the dramatic, ice-gouged lines of the Lauterbrunnen valley led his eyes northwards. Presently they bore left and took the steep path leading up to Gimmelwald. As they climbed, the westering sun began to invest the great snow peaks of the Oberland wall with an unearthly radiance. They stopped to watch.

"Dam' fine," said Hugh suddenly. They moved on again. In the valley below shadows were integrating into a web of darkness, and he forgot it.

A week later they returned to England, bronzed and invigorated. Hugh paid some short visits and finally returned to London, to spend the last few days of his holiday at his niece's flat. Ruth Kellett, his late sister's child, was his only near relative. She was intelligent and professionally successful as a publisher's reader. Their common literary interests drew them together, bridging the gap in their ages.

"We'll expect you in the middle of November, then?" he said on his last evening, taking out his diary.

"Yes please, if that's all right by you and Beccy. I do like a winter break from London about then."

"Right as rain, my dear. Your visits are the highlights of Beccy's year—an outlet for her unconscious exhibitionism as the perfect housekeeper."

"I sometimes think you're the most fortunate widower on earth, Nunk. Tycoons would give the half of their companies for a Beccy. Do you ever have nightmares in which she gives notice?"

"Never!" he said, half startled. "She's been on the job for over thirty years, you know."

It was good to be home again, to be re-established, refreshed in body and mind, in the easy context of familiar people, objects and activities. Beccy, too, always seemed glad when the annual holiday was over. She never looks any different for having been away, thought Hugh. I don't suppose she goes out much when she's with that brother of hers in Streatham. He could hear her moving about his bedroom overhead, unpacking his suitcases, and sorting the clothes that he had brought back.

He finished his tea, lighted up a pipe and began to work through a pile of correspondence, noting dates in his diary, and slipping the agendas of his various committees into folders. This task completed, he turned his attention to the tradesmen's books and Beccy's statement of recent expenditure.

The rising curve of the cost of living showed no sign of flattening out, he reflected, entering the figures in his account book.

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He turned back the pages one year, two years . . . The grocer's book showed the steepest rise. Difficult, if one hadn't a decent margin. His mind went to his investments. Possibly a review of them with his stockbroker might be a sound idea, just to be on the safe side.

Almost as though they had been in telepathic contact Beccy referred to the household expenditure as she served his supper in the dining-room. "I'm sorry the bills is up again, sir. I've tried to be careful, but you've got to stock up a bit after the holidays, and prices seem to go up and up—penny here and penny there all the time. There's no end to it, seemingly."

"It's not your fault, Beccy. I know you're a good manager."

"I'm afraid there's some things no managing'll get round in the end, sir."

"Well, don't worry. Just do the best you can. This soufflé's first class."

"Thank you, sir."

After supper, when he had settled down by the study fire, there came the expected ring at the front door, steps in the hall, and a familiar masculine voice. The door opened to admit Martin Ingram, a Stanchester friend of many years' standing, and now, like Hugh, retired.

"So you're back," remarked the caller, establishing himself comfortably in an armchair on the opposite side of the fireplace, "you look fit enough. Walked much?"

Hugh obliged with a resumé of his activities. "Not bad for a chap of my age," he concluded.

"Age doesn't matter—yet. You're fit. You don't overeat and don't pickle yourself in whisky. I must have rubbed the lamp," he added, as Beccy appeared with the drinks tray.

"I saw you at the station going off for your holiday, Beccy, my dear," he said to her. "Best bonnet and shawl, and enough luggage for the Queen of England."

She bridled slightly, as she always did at the good-natured teasing of Hugh Laverton's friends. "You can't tell what you'll be wanting at this time of year, with the weather so changeable."

An almost imperceptible inflection in her voice caught Hugh's attention. He glanced up, but her face showed no sign of embarrassment. "Pay no heed to Mr. Ingram, Beccy," he said. "He probably travels so light himself that he has to borrow his host's pyjamas. Say when, Martin."

"Thanks." They sat smoking in silence.

"It was the hell of a lot of luggage, all the same," resumed Martin after an interval. "One of those old black, shiny trunks with a curved top. I haven't seen one since I was a kid."

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"Daresay she doesn't like leaving her treasures in an empty house."

"Maybe."

The conversation took another turn.

October passed quickly and Ruth's visit drew on. Hugh became aware of activity in the best spare bedroom. One morning he encountered Beccy on the landing, a hot water bottle in her hand.

"I'm giving Miss Ruth's bed a thorough good airing after all this damp weather, sir," she told him. "Another thing, I've been wondering if we could get an extra pair of blankets before she comes?"

"Good Lord, Beccy," he said, "we must have got dozens of blankets put away."

She looked at him anxiously, her brow puckered. "Not all that number sir, not by no means. And some is old and wearing thin. All that stuff the laundry uses rots them so—a real nasty yellow some of them have gone. I wondered if we might get a pair of those pretty coloured ones?"

Hugh laughed. "Beccy, you're getting frivolous! All right, go ahead. I don't suppose it will break the bank. Choose a good pair while you're about it." She was relieved as much as pleased, he noticed with amusement. Funny how we all like to make an impression, he thought, as he went downstairs.

The blankets were duly bought, shown to him and approved.

As he drove Ruth home from the station a few days later, he remembered to ask her to admire them. From the snatches of dialogue that came floating down the stairs she seemed to be doing her stuff, he decided. Presently she joined him in the study, and Beccy brought in tea, placing the tray in front of Ruth.

"I'm that glad you're here, Miss Ruth," she said earnestly, setting down the cakestand. "To pour out for the master," she added, as she withdrew.

"Has anything happened in Beccy's world?" asked Ruth, when the door had closed. "She doesn't seem quite her usual self, somehow."

"In what way?" Hugh asked in surprise.

"I don't quite know. It's as though the best part of her mind were on something else."

"Nothing has happened that I know of. She seems to be doing her work as well as ever."

"That's not what I mean. But I expect I'm imagining it, or she's starting a cold in the head and has that muffled feeling. Tell me about that new series of crosswords for the Scrutineer."

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They spent an enjoyable evening, centred round an admirable supper.

The next morning was sunny and still, and Hugh suggested a run down to the coast in the car. They had a walk on the cliffs and did not get home until a few minutes before one o'clock. Hugh opened the front door with his latchkey, standing aside to let Ruth go in. As he followed her something unfamiliar, although not immediately identifiable, assailed his consciousness.

"We're in, Beccy," he called.

There was no answer.

"I'll tell her," said Ruth, going across the hall to the kitchen door. As she went he realised that the usual pre-lunch aroma of cooking was missing.

"Nunk!" The sharpness of Ruth's tone brought him hurrying into the room. She was reading a note. He peered over her shoulder.

Sir. I'm truly sorry to leave you but it's time to be going. Your lunch in oven and cold sweet in larder. God bless you.

Beccy.

They stood staring, first at the piece of paper and then at each other.

"She must have gone off her head," Hugh said, after a long pause. "What ought I to do?"

Ruth's eyes travelled round the neat, uncommunicative kitchen. "Perhaps there might be something upstairs . . ." Her voice trailed off as she realised the implication of her words.

"Stay where you are," said Hugh abruptly, "I'm going to search the house."

"Don't be absurd, Nunk. I'm coming with you."

Beginning with the attics, they worked systematically downwards. Beccy's bedroom was stripped of her personal belongings, the bed covered with a dust sheet, a mere slit of window open. Ruth went to the wardrobe. It proved to be piled high with neat newspaper parcels. With a glance at her uncle she ripped one open. It contained a folded blanket. So did the next. And the next . . . The drawers of the chest were similarly filled.

"There must be fifty of them!" she exclaimed. "Where on earth can they all have come from?"

"God knows," he answered wearily.

Ruth looked at him. As they went downstairs she saw that he was moving like an old man. She suddenly felt the gap in their ages. "Listen, Nunk," she said firmly. "The cellars can wait. The door's bolted on the outside. We're going to have some lunch. Whatever happens one's got to eat."

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The hot food restored them to some degree of normality. After discussing possible courses of action, a reply-paid telegram was finally drafted and sent off to Beccy's brother. "Has Beccy arrived safely?" it asked.

"If she's anywhere discoverable, she's there," said Hugh with conviction. "She'd never leave here to go anywhere locally. Her whole status was bound up with this job."

Ruth agreed. As she washed up the lunch dishes and inspected the resources of the larder and store cupboard, she tried to consider the situation objectively. She could hear her uncle wandering restlessly about the house. Presently he came into the kitchen.

"Nunk," she said abruptly, "is anything missing?"

"Absolutely nothing that I can discover. It's an inconceivable idea, but it occurred to me, too."

"Have you noticed anything unusual about the housekeeping accounts lately?"

"No. The books have gone up, of course, especially groceries and fuel, but that's what one would expect. Beccy handled very little ready money. I paid the bills monthly, by cheque."

"Coal and groceries would be difficult loot to make off with," said Ruth thoughtfully.

Something stirred in the depths of Hugh's mind. "Shall we finish the job by having a look round the cellars now?" he suggested.

She followed him to the door in the hall which gave on to the cellar stairs. Unbolting it, he switched on a light. "We had the whole place cleaned up and put into good order for an air-raid shelter, as you probably remember," he said, going down ahead of her. "This one on the left is the coal cellar . . . Good God!"

In the harsh glare of a naked electric light bulb they stared at an enormous mass of gleaming black coal, heaped to the roof at the back of the long cellar, and extending towards them in a huge, convex tongue. For the fraction of a second Hugh saw the Breithorn Glacier, dazzling white against a deep azure sky. Then he became aware of Ruth opening another door and, once again, exclaimed sharply. This second cellar had once been a larder, and retained a shelf of stone slabs flanking three of its four walls.

This shelf was stacked with stout cardboard cartons, of the type in which wholesalers despatch their products. Each carton was secured with strong string. Hugh whipped out a pocket knife and slashed the nearest carton free. It was carefully packed with tins of meat, soup, fish, and other food-stuffs. He pulled

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them out, one by one, and stood them on the shelf, their brightly-coloured wrappings garish in the strong light.

"My goodness," he said, "she must have been building up this hoard for years. Some sort of progressive mental derangement, I suppose, and I never suspected a thing. I could have sent her to the best brain man in London if I'd known . . . What the hell can I do with all this stuff?" he added almost fretfully.

Ruth suddenly felt claustrophobic. The low ceiling pressed down, and the ranks of cartons assumed a frightening quality.

"Let's go upstairs, out of this," she said.

In the study Hugh flung himself into his chair and looked at her with a sudden smile. "I'm sorry, my dear. I'm taking this badly. The fact is, it's been a great shock. The thought of Beccy wandering about half-crazed somewhere simply appals me. And heaven knows how I'm going to manage for the future!"

"That particular problem doesn't arise at the moment, as I'm here," she said calmly, and was rewarded by the relaxation of tension in his face. "As to Beccy, we can only hope—"

The telephone bell broke in. Hugh started up and hurried into the hall. It was evidently the answer to the telegram.

Ruth sat listening to his repetition of the message: "Yes. Seeing her off at airport tomorrow. Ethel Easterbrook."

"Utterly baffling though this is, it's an enormous relief," he said as he came back. "But where do we go from here?"

Between them they composed a letter to Beccy's brother, which caught the evening post.

An answer came quickly, but it merely added to their bewilderment. Beccy's brother and sister-in-law, equally bewildered at the manner of her departure, had known that she was leaving Stanchester since the spring, and had naturally assumed that her employer knew too. Her decision to do so had astounded them, and they had tried to dissuade her.

"I expect they quite reasonably assumed that you would make some provision for her," suggested Ruth.

"So I have, of course."

The letter went on to say that Beccy had given them no sensible reason for leaving, but "kept on about it being time to be going, and so forth." She had answered an advertisement in the paper, and been interviewed during her recent holiday, arriving with most of her possessions, some of which were now in her brother's care. She had gone out by air to be housekeeper to a wealthy gentleman living in the Bermudas.

Ruth sat thinking, head on hand. "Even these days, Nunk, she must surely have produced references for anyone to pay her air fare to the Bermudas?"

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"I hope to goodness she didn't forge them," said Hugh. "This man may be an absolute rotter, too. Ought I to institute inquiries, or help the brother to, do you think?"

"I don't see how you can at the moment, beyond keeping in touch with the brother. If he doesn't hear from her, then something certainly ought to be done, to my mind. But reverting to references, is there anyone local who might have given her one? The Vicar, for instance?"

"She went to the Methodist chapel. You may be on to something. They have got a rather outstanding chap there, I've heard; the new type," he added comprehensively. "Shall I ring him up?" They sat on in silence, each deep in thought.

"I've been getting more and more sick of London," said Ruth suddenly. "In fact I've discussed moving out and working on a part-time basis. I'd thought of looking for a country cottage in these parts, and was actually going to discuss the idea with you. Now I'm wondering if you'd like me to housekeep for you, and get in some daily help. I shouldn't achieve anything remotely resembling Beccy's standards, of course."

"I've been grateful to Beccy for over thirty years," Hugh said, stretching out his hand to her, "but never more than at this moment."

Hugh Laverton unobtrusively observed the Reverend Charles Bryden across the tea table, and revised his image of a Methodist minister. He had expected more professionalism, and certainly less scientific objectivity. There was genuine warmth and sympathy, both on Beccy's account and on his own, but not a vestige of sentimentality. Only thirty-five, and he talks as though nothing in human behaviour is surprising, he thought!

"It's one of the most interesting psychological problems that I have ever come across," said Charles Bryden, putting down his cup. "I should very much like to see the actual exhibits, if I may."

Somewhat taken aback Hugh handed over Beccy's note and her brother's letter, and when these had been studied, the hoards of blankets and food were inspected in situ.

"Could you make any use of this tinned stuff, and of some of the blankets?" asked Hugh, as they all three stood in the cellar.

"Certainly I can, for our invalids and old people, and the Christmas sale, too. Thank you very much, Mr. Laverton."

The minister looked about him, a hand on the jamb of the door. "Of course there was some strong compulsive fear behind all this," he said. "Was she afraid of another war, do you think?"

"Nothing that she ever said gave me that impression."

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Ruth picked up the opened carton, and made as though to repack it. "Why there's a picture at the bottom," she exclaimed, extracting a discoloured photograph cut from a newspaper. "Snow in the Cairngorms."

"I think it might be worth while opening all the other cartons," said Bryden.

As they worked through them, a little pile of pictures accumulated. Spread out on the dining-room table, the collection of photographs, advertisements, and picture postcards embodied a single theme. Snow-covered peaks at home and abroad, snow-blocked roads, blizzards, glaciers, rivers frozen over, majestic icebergs reiterated immobilising, implacable cold.

Hugh tapped two of the postcards. "I sent her these this year," he said.

"This one's got a date left on: February 1956," said Bryden.

Further investigation showed that the collection dated back to the early months of 1947. Ruth gave an involuntary shiver. "No, it's not suggestion," she said, as they looked at her. "Just the creepiness of the obsession."

"Quite," remarked the minister. "You said that Miss Easterbrook had gone to the Bermudas, didn't you? It's been done before, in a manner of speaking, of course."

"What has been done before?" asked Hugh, a note of exasperation in his voice.

"Escaping to the sun from the menace of deathly cold. Our forebears in Western Europe migrated south as the glaciers edged down from the north. Race memory is generally unrecognised, but it is undoubtedly compulsively operative in quite a lot of people. We're on the end of innumerable chains you know."

"But why on earth should poor Beccy have been so affected by this particular memory?" asked Ruth, repressing another shiver.

"That we shall never know with any certainty, I expect. I think you said that Mrs. Laverton died in the spectacular winter of early 1947, sir? It occurs to me that that coincidence of death and cold may have been the spark which fired the train."

"It seems a pretty fantastic explanation to me," said Hugh, after a pause. "But perhaps it's no more so than poor Beccy's actions warrant. She seemed so utterly normal. I suppose she was really leading two quite separate lives, one based on reality, and the other on all this fantasy?"

"Almost certainly, I should think, and this set up a tension which became so unendurable that in the end she had to resolve it by more dynamic action than building up stores."

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They returned to the study. Charles Bryden, pressed to stay, glanced at his watch. "Thank you, but I'm due at a meeting in half an hour and must be off. Will you keep me posted with any news of Miss Easterbrook? Perhaps I might profitably write to her."

Hugh willingly gave the undertaking, and both he and Ruth escorted the minister to the door.

"Anyway," said the latter cheerfully, pausing on the step, "let us hope that the stimulus was memory, and not presentiment.

"Personally, I'm convinced that we're linked with the future as well as with the past, and that presentiment has a scientific basis of which we've discovered next to nothing as yet. Good night!"

He hurried off.

Six weeks later, as December 1962 drew to its close, the first blizzard of the Great Winter struck the country.

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" Do you always put on glasses to kiss a girl? " she said

TOUCH OF MAGIC

BY JACK FINNEY

I'M a great lunchtime prowler. I like to dash out of the office, grab a sandwich and a cup of coffee, buy a slab of chocolate or a Nuttichoo or something, and then poke around: into an old junk shop, or a Railway Lost Property sale; a second-hand bookshop, or an amusement arcade; a pawnshop or— You know the sort of thing? You do if you've ever been a lunchtime prowler. But there aren't very many of us; not real ones that is. The only other one I ever ran into from our firm—an advertising agency in the City—was Millicent Piper, from the art department. I wandered into a Do It Yourself shop one day, and there she was, right at the back, fiddling with a lathe. At least, I was pretty sure no one else could look so shapeless and down-at-heel, but it was rather dark and her back was towards me. But when she turned round, her hair falling over her face, I saw it really was Millie.

She wore her hair like someone in an 1895 out-of-focus tin-type, parted near the middle in a jagged lightning streak, hanging straight down at the sides and bunched up at the back in a sagging granny knot. It covered the sides of her face as though she were peeping between two curtains, and it kept creeping over her eyes like a sort of protective camouflage. Walking towards her, I was thinking that her dresses were like old ladies' hats; you couldn't imagine where she could possibly have bought them. The one she had on now, like all her others, was no particular colour; call it anything, and you wouldn't be wrong. It was a sort of reddish, greenish, blackish, haphazard draping of cloth which looked as though it had fallen on her from a considerable height.

The heels of her shoes, most of the time, were so worn down that her ankles bent out as if she was learning to skate, and she's the only young adult woman I ever saw with one of the side pieces of her spectacles broken and held together with adhesive tape. They were the ornate kind some girls wear, studded with

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little shiny stones; but half the stones were missing, and the spectacles rested halfway down her nose, so that one eye almost looked over the top of the frame, the other peered underneath. She looked like the model for one of her own wilder cartoons.

I said, "Hullo, Millie. What are you buying—a lathe?"

She surprised me. "Hullo, Ian," she said. "I'm thinking about it. I've got a drill, a ratchet, a plane, and a nine-inch table saw. Now I need a lathe. So I'll probably buy one."

I looked puzzled. Someone had told me she lived in a little two-roomed flat.

"Oh, I haven't much space to use them, but I'm mad about tools. I'm not awfully interested in clothes," she said, as though she thought I might not have noticed, "so I'm filling my bottom drawer with tools. Some day, when I'm married, I'll be able to build our furniture. Perhaps even the house."

I was intrigued at the thought of a girl with a bottom drawer full of tools, and I wanted to hear more about it. I brought out a Nuttichoo I'd bought and offered Millie some. She said, No she still had half a Love Nest left, and she pulled it out of her skirt pocket, unwrapped it, and we wandered round the shop for a time, while she told me about her carpentry.

She talked all the way back to the office, looking up at me from time to time through her slanted spectacles. Because the adhesive tape had been applied in a hit-or-miss fashion, they didn't, as I've said, pretend to be on an even keel, and had the effect of bisecting her eyes. Her eyes seemed to wander a bit, too, and in trying to see into them, I nearly tripped over.

I learned that Millie was a fully-fledged lunchtime prowler; she'd been to most of the places I had, and she mentioned several that I hadn't come across. So I wasn't surprised, later that week when I passed a dance studio, to see her there. It was on the first floor, a corner room with big windows. I'd gone in one day and knew they offered you a free trial lesson. So now, as I passed on the opposite side of the road, I glanced up, and there was Millie, having a free lesson. Her head rested dreamily on the instructor's shoulder. The instructor was looking down at her as if wondering how he'd ever got into this line of business.

I mention Millie because of what happened the following week. One lunchtime I was in Soho and I found a little narrow-fronted shop jammed between a barber's and an Italian restaurant. It said: Illusions Ltd. on the window, and in a corner in smaller letters: *Novelties, Jokes, Jewellery, Souvenirs.* I went in, of course. There were glass showcases on three sides, practically filling the place. The proprietor was behind one, leaning on it and reading a newspaper. He was a thin, tired-looking, saturnine

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man, and he just glanced up and nodded, then went back to reading his paper.

I looked at the stuff in the showcases; it was about what you'd expect. There was some jewellery—imitation gold rings mounted with big zircons; imitation turquoise-and-silver brooches; Chinese good-luck rings. On one counter was a metal rack filled with printed comic signs, with a display of practical jokes in the showcase underneath—a plastic ice cube with a fly in it, an ink bottle with a shiny metal puddle of what looked like spilt ink—that sort of thing.

I said, "Have you got any new magic tricks?"

The man finished a line he was reading, then looked up. "Well," he said, "have you seen this?" He put his hand into the showcase and brought out a little brass cylinder with a handle. I recognised it—it changed a little pile of halfpennies into pennies—and I told him I'd seen it. "Well, there's this," he said. He put his hand into the showcase again and pulled out a cardboard box containing a dozen or so pairs of spectacles. "These are new. A traveller left them last week."

I picked up a pair. It was just a cheap plastic frame with clear-glass lenses, no false nose attached or anything like that, and I looked at the man and said, "What are they for?"

He reached wearily into the showcase once more—he'd demonstrated so many tricks for so many people and made so few sales—and took out a silk handkerchief. He made a fist with his other hand, draped the handkerchief over it, and held it up.

"Put on the glasses," he said, and I did.

It wasn't a bad trick. As soon as I put them on, I could see his fist very clearly; the handkerchief itself was barely visible.

"Not bad," I said. "How does it work?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. The man said some rays of light will penetrate cloth if it's thin, but not enough to see through. The lenses are ground somehow so as to magnify the rays and then you can see the hand underneath."

I nodded, taking off the spectacles. "Is that all?"

"Yes. Well, there are a couple of other tricks you can do with it."

I went outside. A big van and several taxis stood motionless in a traffic jam. A man wearing a business suit and carrying a briefcase turned to cross the road between two taxis. A tall, goodlooking showgirl type from one of the theatres round here was walking along the other side of the street. I put on the spectacles absently, wondering if I wanted them; I had felt I ought to buy something. The van and the taxis sat there, the drivers leaning on their steering wheels trying to keep calm. The

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man in the business suit stepped on to the opposite pavement. The showgirl was still walking, but her *dress* had vanished!

There she was, walking along, glancing into shop windows, and wearing nothing but high heels, a bra and a petticoat, and a handbag! Then I saw the dress, ghostlike and almost invisible, swaying as she walked. I snatched off the spectacles and instantly the dress was solid—thin but not transparent. I jammed them on again before she got out of sight, almost putting my eye out with one of the sidepieces, and there she was, by George, that handsome, swaying figure under the nearly vanished dress marvellously visible once more.

When I went back into the shop, the proprietor was reading his paper again. "Er, look," I said, hesitating. "These are fine, but—I was wondering if you've got a stronger pair."

He shook his head. "No, but it's funny, that's something lots of people want. I'm going to ask the traveller the next time he comes in here. These only work for one layer of pretty thin cloth; not much use for anything but tricks, as far as I can see. There's a couple of good ones, though. For example, you get someone to wrap a coin in a handker—"

"How much?"

"Seven and six," he said.

I bought them and walked back towards the office, and it seemed to me that if girls understood how delightful they looked walking along as I saw them then, they'd dress that way all the time, at least in nice weather. It'd be a lot cooler, terrifically healthy, and would bring a great deal of happiness into a drab, prosaic world.

But I didn't wear my spectacles very long. I stopped at a corner to wait for the traffic lights to change. Beside me stood a girl with a haughty face, the kind that shrivels you with a look if you so much as glance at her. She stood there in—I don't know why, but it's true—a bright-blue bra and a pair of vivid orange panties, and I leaned towards her and murmured, "Orange and blue don't go together."

She looked at me in bewilderment; then her eyes widened, and she whirled and began looking frantically about her. The lights changed, the policeman on duty waved us across; she headed towards him, and I trotted to the other pavement glancing at my watch so that people would think I'd suddenly remembered I was late for an appointment, and snatched off the spectacles so that I'd be harder to identify. I didn't have the nerve to put them on again all the way back to the office.

Zoë was at the switchboard as I went in. She was the best-looking girl in the office, resembling Anita Ekberg, only slimmer;

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more of a fashion-model type. I whipped out my spectacles, put them on, said "Hullo" and—what a disappointment! There, under that expensive, smart-looking, narrow-waisted, flounced-out dress, sat a girl only ounces this side of malnutrition. It was the kind of figure that women, in their pitiful ignorance, envy; no hips, no nothing, except prominent ribs. "You don't eat enough, Zoë," I said.

She nodded proudly. "That's what my flatmate says."

"Well, he's right."

"Listen, wise guy—" she began, and I held up a hand placatingly, and she smiled, and I walked on.

After that I kept my glasses on, but I was so busy I couldn't get out of my office, and no one came in till just before it was time to go. My door opened then, and I raised my eyes, and there before me, in bra and what I believe are called briefs, embroidered with forget-me-nots and I swore I never would, was—well, there is no describing this, and I'm not going to try. It was nothing more or less than the most magnificently beautiful feminine figure the human race has ever known. It may even have been a mutation; the very first example of a new height in beauty, to which humanity had never previously soared. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't lift my eyes until something vaguely familiar began tapping at the door of my flabbergasted memory. The ankles, I saw, were bowed out. Then my chin shot up, and I was staring openmouthed at the face above that incredible figure.

"Did I startle you or something, Ian? Sorry," said Millie, her constellation of various size half-eyes smiling at me round her spectacles.

"That's all right," I mumbled. I yanked off *my* spectacles, and there stood Millie in shapeless sackcloth, as always.

"I forgot to tell you," she said, "that I found a ladies' billiards room near Charing Cross last month."

I soon stopped wearing my spectacles regularly, though I kept them in the breastpocket of my coat for emergency use. But the novelty wore off quickly. It was like walking around on a beach all day; you get used to it. And I never put them on—the contrast between face and figure was too much—when Millie dropped into my office, as she took to doing. She'd come in to tell me about some lunch-hour discovery, and I told her about Illusions Ltd. Usually she'd be eating a Love Nest bar, not so much because of the taste, she explained, but because she loved to ask for them.

Going to work on the bus one morning a week later, I sat next

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to the oculist whose shop is next door to our office; I know him quite well. We spoke, and then sat reading our papers, till the bus stopped at some traffic lights. I looked up to see where we were just as a particularly extravagant example of lush girlhood was crossing the street, and I whipped out my spectacles and clapped them on in a blur of movement. I now had, I felt sure, a faster draw than even Billy the Kid had boasted.

"Long-sighted?" my oculist friend asked, and I said, No, these lenses were ground so that you could see through thin cloth. He chuckled delightedly and said, "Any lenses that could do that must be magic."

I took off the spectacles and stared at him. "You mean you couldn't make lenses like that?" I asked.

"Of course not," he said, with the tolerant little chuckle doctors and such use for the idiot questions of stupid laymen.

The bus was approaching a stop, and I got to my feet. "Something I've got to do before I go to the office," I explained.

The man in Illusions Ltd. looked up from his morning paper as I walked in. "That traveller was in again, but he hasn't got any stronger glasses. I asked," he said.

"Never mind. That isn't why I came," I said. "Tell me, what does this traveller look like? Has he got a thin, saturnine face, a little beard, and strangely hypnotic eyes? Is his hair black and glossy and high above the temples, as though concealing little horns?"

"No, that must be a man from some other company. This here traveller is fat. He wears a dark blue suit and a bowler."

I nodded, disappointed, then thought of something. "He was here again, did you say? What did he leave?"

"Some jewellery. Cheap stuff. I wouldn't have took it if he hadn't left it on appro."

I shrugged. "I might as well look at it, as I'm here."

"Help yourself."

He pulled a cardboard box out of a showcase, shoved it at me, and went back to his paper.

Tumbled in the box lay a dozen heart-shaped little boxes made of pink plastic. I opened one. Lying on a piece of pink felt was a bracelet made of brassy-looking links studded with red glass hearts; it was about the gaudiest bit of cheap jewellery I'd ever seen. A badly printed label inside the lid read:

Genuine Egyptian Slave Bracelet

and a little gummed tab on the back said: 5/9.

I paid—the man looked at me pityingly—then hurried out and to the office. Zoë was at the switchboard, looking, with clothes on, as lovely as ever, and I stopped. There was no one else

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about. I took out the pink box, opened it, and showed her the bracelet. "I've just bought this," I said.

She glanced at the bracelet, then up at me. "Bought it? Or did you find it in a Christmas cracker?"

"Bought it. Try it on. I'd like to see how it looks."

She frowned, but picked up the bracelet, slipped it on her wrist, then held out her arm to inspect the result. It looked terrible.

I said, "Zoë, you are now my slave. Kiss me, you mad fool!"

And she stood up, walked out of her little enclosure, grabbed me round the waist, bent me far back—it was like a reverse scene from a Rudolph Valentino film—stared into my eyes for a moment, then kissed me. Enormous blue sparks flashed and crackled round the room like St. Elmo's fire. It was the most wildly abandoned and passionate kiss I'd ever imagined, and I've imagined some beauties.

It didn't stop, either. The switchboard buzzed, then another buzz began in a slightly different key, then a third. I didn't realise it was the switchboard; I thought it was my nerves twanging in ecstasy, and my mind and senses threw up their hands and went down for the first, then the second time, and were just going under for the last time when I managed to reach out with my little remaining strength and yank the bracelet off her wrist, or there's no telling what might have happened.

Zoë raised her lovely head, stared at me a moment, said, "For heaven's sake," and ran to her board.

In my office, I closed the door, sat down at my desk, and with trembling hands began putting the bracelet into its box.

The door opened, and Millie walked in, saying, "Did you know there's a farrier's near—" She stopped, her mouth still open, and stared at the bracelet in the pink heart-shaped box. She leaned closer; two long locks of hair fell across her face, and with both hands she pulled them aside, like Stanley parting the jungle undergrowth. For a moment longer, she stared. Then she said, "Isn't it *beautiful*? Oh, Ian, it's the loveliest thing I've ever seen!"

I looked at her quickly, but she wasn't joking. Her eyes, face, and voice were filled with the kind of yearning the Little Match-Girl might have felt as she gazed through the shop window at the doll she could never have, and I realised that Millie was probably the only human being in the civilised world who could think that bracelet was beautiful.

I knew I could get another in the lunch-hour, so I said, "Do you really like it? It's yours," and handed it to her, box and all. I was glad I did, because Millie was entranced. Thanking

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me again and again, she put it on, then revolved her wrist till I thought her arm would fall off.

That lunch-hour, I returned to Illusions Ltd., and I couldn't believe, my mind wouldn't accept, what the man was telling me. But he repeated it. "That's right. A fellow bought one just after you left this morning, and half an hour later, he came back for the rest. Wanted to buy a gross, but I hadn't got them."

I could hardly speak.

"But—can't you get some more?"

He shrugged. "I'll try. I'll ask the man next time he comes round. But he never seems to have the same thing twice."

I didn't have any lunch; I didn't feel like it. I bought a Nuttichoo, but could only eat half. Back at the office I felt even worse, because in came Millie to thank me again, holding out her arm so that I could admire the bracelet. I sat thinking that this was typical of me; here was the only genuine Egyptian slave bracelet I'd ever get my hands on, and of all the wrists of all the girls in the world, I'd managed to get it on Millie's.

Twice I opened my mouth to tell her I'd got to have that bracelet back, it was a family heirloom, and I'd get her another that was bigger, better, and even gaudier. But I just could not get the words out. Could you take a big, delicious chocolate away from a child, telling her you'd get her a better one some other time? It just wasn't possible to take that bracelet away, yet the thought of a genuine slave bracelet being entirely wasted was more than I could stand. I had a sudden idea.

I took out my spectacles, put them on, and then—careful not to lift my eyes too high—I slowly looked at Millie. The embroidered forget-me-nots were gone today, but I hadn't forgotten. There beside my desk, ankles bowed outwards and one wrist steadily revolving, stood the world's most spectacular figure. And now, by an inspired act of will, I pictured Zoë's lovely face at the top of that splendid torso. It was a spectacular combination, and I stood up saying, "Kiss me. You are my slave," and she did, her arms winding immediately round my neck. It was terrific! It was stupendous!

When we finally stopped, Millie sighed deeply and said, "Do you always put on your specs to kiss a girl?"

I said, "Yes."

She said, "Then why are your eyes shut?"

"Shut up, and kiss me again," I said, and she did, and this time it lasted even longer and was even more stupendous. Just kiss a girl like Zoë some time with your arms round a figure like Millie's, and you'll know what I mean. It was so wonderful, in

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fact, that the actual truth of what was happening faded from my mind. In a fit of delirious absent-mindedness, I languorously opened my eyes, and there, staring into mine, were Millie's eyes—all of them. I got so dizzy I had to break loose and sit on the edge of the desk; not because of the split-level eyes in assorted sizes—I was used to them now—but because every single one of them was chockful of love. They were filled with it! They swam with it! I shut my eyes.

From an enormous distance I heard Millie saying, "Ian, darling, you're wonderful! I love you! Open your eyes!"

I couldn't. Then I forced myself—cautiously opening my eyes to a slit, I looked again. They were still there, those eyes aflame with the light of love, and I slammed my eyelids shut, knowing I'd managed to make things infinitely worse.

"I'm crazy about you!" Millie was saying. "I'm your slave!" She pulled off my glasses, saying, "Please open your eyes and kiss me again!"

Bravely, I looked once more. She was peering at me tenderly, dressed in what appeared to be a canvas parachute in which she'd become hopelessly tangled. I thought of pretending to faint, then my phone rang, and I snatched it up. It was just one of the men from the accounts department with one of the foolish questions they ask, and I answered with a word. But I kept the phone at my ear long after he'd hung up, saying, "Yes," and, "Of course," occasionally looking at Millie and shrugging helplessly. Finally she left, murmuring endearments. I hung up the phone, covered my face with my hands, and planting my elbows squarely on the spectacles Millie had put on the desk, smashed both lenses. But I was beyond caring.

Later, splashing cold water on my face in the cloakroom, I wondered what to do. Here was a girl helplessly in love with me, and it was all my fault. Perhaps I was morally obliged to pretend that I, too—but I knew I couldn't. I went back to my desk, and three times that afternoon, Millie looked in hopefully, lovingly, and I told her I had a headache.

I don't know whether Millie guessed the truth that night, but all next morning she didn't come into my office. When lunch-time came and she still hadn't come in, I was suddenly filled with remorse. She was a nice girl; I'd probably hurt her feelings terribly, and— What if she were at the river, *in* it by now, going down for the last time, refusing to struggle? All that lunch-hour, I prowled up and down the Embankment, cursing myself, worrying, and when I got back to the office and sat down at my desk and Millie came in, friendly and happy as ever, I jumped up and yelled, "Where *were* you at lunchtime?"

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She just smiled and shook her head. "Want some?" she said, holding out a wrapped chocolate bar, clutched in her hand like a banana. Printed on the wrapper I could see the first word, LOVE, and the beginning vertical stroke of the next, and since Love Nests aren't really my favourite, I said, No, thanks. But she insisted so I took a bite.

Surprisingly, it was delicious, and when she offered me some more, I took another bite.

Her eyes gleaming with love, she said, "Finish it."

So I did, chewing slowly, postponing as long as possible what I was afraid would happen next.

It happened. "Kiss me, darling," Millie said.

I looked at her, my mouth opening to say I'd got a headache again. But I didn't say it. I just sat there, astounded. It had suddenly occurred to me that if Millie would simply use a judicious hairpin or two and unravel that knot at the back, her hair would not only stay in place, but would become a very pretty pageboy bob. And that if she'd just take off those crazy—

I stood up as though in a dream and did it myself. I pulled off those terrible spectacles, and her confusing half-eyes merged into a single set of enormous, beautiful, myopic blue eyes. She couldn't see me now, but I could see her, and her face was absolutely lovely. It was every bit as beautiful as the accompanying figure I now found I was holding in my arms. I started to speak but stopped and kissed her long and lingeringly.

For a fateful moment, I drew back to look at that wonderful face. Then I had to grab her to me again, murmuring all sorts of trite phrases such as, "I love you."

Millie said, "Of course."

And I said, "When can we get married?"

To which she said, "As soon as possible."

Looking down over her lovely shoulder, I noticed the chocolate bar paper lying where she'd dropped it on my desk, and now I could read both words printed on it. LOVE POTION they said in big blue letters, and then I knew where Millie had been during the lunch-hour.

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GNU VIEW

Giraffes and gnus in zoos amuse
Curious crowds of humans whose
Ludicrous aspects, it ensues,
Likewise amuse giraffes and gnus.

E. J.

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Argosy's New Discovery—a first story by a young writer with a future!

ARISTIDE

BY ANN DRYSDALE

ONCE upon a time there lived a little boy called Aristide Delhomme; Aristide after his grandfather. He was born in St Veronique on the coast of Normandy, in the spring, and he had red hair. His grandfather owned an iron foundry near Caen, and his father was a farmer. Aristide, above all else, wanted to be a circus clown, but he had never spoken of this to anyone.

It was August and Aristide was happy, because that was the time the circus came to the village and his grandfather came to the house, both on their annual visit, and his grandfather always took him to watch the single performance.

Aristide Delhomme senior was a man who understood the mystic link between boys and circuses, and he knew, to his own sorrow, that this was not so with his son. So every year he would make a point of spending the latter half of August with the family, and of taking the young Aristide to see the itinerant show.

It had come already to St Veronique that year, no more than a tawdry caravan, with six people and as many dogs. The work-horses that pulled the shabby cart were the same that, at dusk, must convince the spectators they were fresh from the sands of Arabia. In daylight this did not look possible. But then Aristide never saw them in daylight.

The diminutive size of the whole affair enabled the apparatus to be assembled in a flash. As one watched—benches, pulled from the waiting-room of the Town Hall down the steps and on to the green, were tugged by two of the circus men into a rude circle, with the caravan set, like a half-open gate, at an angle to the only gap in the seats. The circle seemed small, seance-small, waiting for night to bring reality.

And so on that August evening, when Aristide was ten years old, a passer-by would have seen a redhaired boy and an old man, deep in earnest conversation, walking towards the open door of a barn. Aristide was showing his grandfather round the farm that was intended as his inheritance, his lips buttoned lest at any

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moment he might divulge that he intended to leave St Veronique the next day with the circus.

It was not yet dusk as they entered. The sun lay low, its beams running horizontally into the barn, shining on the things nearest the floor so that it appeared as if the upper half of the door had been shut against it. Aristide's cousin and a small man with a glass eye laboured side by side in the dust, which swirled round them, so that their bodies, though turning rhythmically with their labour, seemed almost still by comparison.

The man with the glass eye shovelled grain from the fields into a pit sunk in the barn floor. Beside him, on a pedestal, a small petrol motor shivered and whined, driving a belt which caused the grain to be drawn up through a pipe which overhung a hopper in the loft. This hopper was not static, but shaking constantly, so that the good grain sank to a central hole through which it was sucked away from the lighter chaff, descending again through another pipe in intermittent rushes and pauses to where Aristide's cousin waited with new sacks. He stood beside the glass-eyed man, and occasionally their shoulders touched, completing the perfect circle. When one sack was full, he would lift it, swinging in a wide arc, and replace it with another, which began to grow wide-bellied with the golden drops.

From time to time, glass-eye would pour water into a depression at the top of the motor, to replace the thin column of steam that rose constantly from it. Neither man spoke, glass-eye because he could not, and the other because glass-eye could not. The visitors acknowledged them silently.

Aristide climbed the ladder into the loft. He put his hand under the stream that fell into the hopper, and it sprayed, fountain-wise—the chaff drifting in the stillness, the hard grains stinging his arm—springing down into the trough to disappear beneath the soft upper film on the top of it, where black corn-insects hurried, slipping downwards, backwards, into the hollow cone above the hole, and fighting upwards only to slide again. In the loft the motor sounded distant. Nearer was the sibilant sliding of the seeping grain below and the hard rushing of more from above. It sounded to Aristide like the roar of applause, hard and staccato from the front rows and changed to a soft hiss from the crowd at the back. The excitement welled up in him. He picked up a handful of grains like tiny people in his hand and threw them into the air. Soon tomorrow would come.

Then the sounds stopped, one by one. First the motor dying away, then the shovelling, leaving merely the rush above to slow to a fine shower and be still, the last of the drops falling only because they had been drawn up and left suspended. Aristide

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caught these last in his hands and carried them down the ladder to throw them in the lower trough again.

His cousin was whistling softly, to break the silence. He breathed deeply, and spoke to the visitors. As they clambered into the trailer behind the softly-chugging tractor—Aristide helping the game old man—to be driven back towards the village and the circus, at once the shouting began, loud and wide-sounding. The cousin heaved his jacket on to his shoulders, spreading his arms like an eagle's wings, and stretching the garment across his back as if it were another sack.

He leapt nimbly into the driving-seat, and they moved off, leaving glass-eye to lock up the barn.

As they went along the cart track beneath the apple trees, the old man half stood in the trailer, reaching up with his stick at a loaded bough. As they passed, he grasped it, and held it as they went forwards, so that the tree, weaker, was forced to yield up this whole branch of young fruit, tearing a white hole in the green wood. When it was secured, the old man turned and handed it like a bouquet to the boy, and they laughed and chewed the damp fruit all the way back to the house.

Fires were lighted on the green at nightfall and the village gathered. The mayor was already seated in his own high-backed chair, drawn out on to the grass; the chair lent dignity by the change of its context. The mayor was in total shadow, since he had drawn back from the flames to preserve the veneer on the chair, that it might fit no less into its rightful place when the time came. A man was leaning, side-twisted over a cabinet on the grass, leisurely painting his face into ugliness. The black-rimmed eyes, painstakingly unnatural, were rendered human again by the tender light of the fires, while the face of the boy who watched him silently was made gaunt and hollow by the shadows, and his brown hair had become a wig of seraph-gold.

Aristide and his grandfather had been waiting at the green to ensure good seats, and had seen these two, the man and the boy, and watched them.

In the fading daylight, the man had struck the boy. In dragging one of the benches, the boy had upset a bucket of horse-fodder, and the loose chaff had blown in the wind. The chase had begun, man after boy, among the mad-spinning fragments, over the bench which was lying where the boy had let it fall, and the blows had ended it.

The boy knelt in the last of the sun, his face upturned, with the pale jaw hanging, reddening from the blows. The tears had flowed silent from the dark eyes, as silent as the two of them

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stood now against the gathering sound, the firelight taking the anger from the eyes beneath the paint, and defining the hurt on the smaller, sallow face.

Now all were gathered, bent forward on the benches, the smallest in front, staring into the space that was still empty, pretending that they would not care if it were not filled, waiting and watching, pretending to know all that would take place, how and why, pretending intimacy with the circus people themselves, so that they might forestall the dull feeling of apartness, the sense of being the entertained, that manifests itself as jealousy of the entertainer and is disguised, but never hidden, by spoken admiration: only the innocent can admire without bitterness.

First, all saw dogs, laboriously taught to do things that are of no value to dogs. Their act began before a silent host, but soon a murmur came as the man they had seen painting his face made ready to enter the ring. He was completely changed, his face a total white overpainted in nacre by the firelight, and the parents said to their children, and the children to each other, " Now you will see Monsieur Achille."

They laughed at him, even as he entered the ring, walking as all men walk, one foot before the other. Aristide held his breath. The village remembered him from the last time, and from all the other last times. He had not changed his act.

First he stood on one leg, and looked for the other, twisted behind him, and the children shouted, " Look! It is there, Monsieur Achille, behind you! " Then he mimed tragedy and misadventure, falling, always falling, and afterwards he aped the men and women sitting round him, without their knowing—for if once they found out he would cease to be a clown and become an actor, and in St Veronique they mistrusted actors.

Next he brought chairs, one by one until there were seven, tripping about the ring as he brought each one, rolling and sliding and piling them one on the other until there stood a pyramid of chairs in the centre of the ring.

It was the climax, and the people waited, laughing. He stepped back from the structure, paused, ran, leapt, poised on the pinnacle and uttered a howl of triumph which turned to mock-despair as the chairs tottered and collapsed in deliberate slow-motion. Their fall swung the painted figure outwards and downwards, howling, free-falling to the ground, where he lay still. All the while the people laughed, rocking and swaying.

Now a masked, red-nosed doctor hobbled into the ring, laid a tricolour over the white face and announced that Monsieur Achille was dead, standing with his head bowed—until a roar of applause signalled that Monsieur Achille was alive, resurrected,

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and he chased the charlatan round and round and out of the ring, returning for his customary bow to the assembly. Aristide seemed already to share in the applause that followed, and it seemed he also was out there, painted and breathless, and he was happy.

It was as Monsieur Achille stood, bowing low, that the boy Aristide had seen before ran from the caravan and climbed on to the chestnut horse, and it was the cries of the stooge and the dog-man that made him turn to see the boy urging the animal forward into the ring.

The people watched. "Ah," they said, "Monsieur Achille's son has an act of his own," and they applauded.

The horse was in the ring now, unsaddled, unbridled, and the boy leaned forward on its neck. It circled Monsier Achille, who tried to catch it as the onlookers laughed, and then it lunged forward, many-coloured in the firelight, gold in its gleam and black-purple in its shadow. The people scattered in ragged fear as it approached the benches, cleared them with a leap and made off into the darkness bearing the fire-gold child.

In the moment's silence after, they heard again Monsieur Achille's howl of despair, before their own sounds began and a dozen men ran forward in the direction the horse had taken.

The two Aristides had been among those nearest to the point where the horse had leapt from the circle, and had heard the gasping sounds of the boy, louder than the horse, for its beat was muffled by the grass, louder than the hushed spectators, louder even than the long cry of despair, for it was nearer to them, and the old man wondered whether this was the echo of the sobs that had earlier been soundless. The two went with the group that followed the horse.

The golden horse stood still on the beach, its hoofs deep in the sand. It had leapt the stone wall and could go no farther because of the sea. Nor could it turn back, because the beach was lower than the level above. It stood still, and they boy lay beside it, face down, shaken with long sobs. One of the men mounted the horse and another passed the boy up into his arms. They moved to a place where the ground was lower and the horse picked its way up the bank with its burden.

Monsieur Achille was waiting for them, a little apart from the circle on the green. He took the boy from them and carried him into the caravan.

This was the last time that Aristide visited the circus, and as they walked home the old man squeezed the boy's hand and said in answer to his unspoken question, "Perhaps he wanted to be a farmer."

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A HURRICANE of CHOCOLATES AND TABOOS

by John Moore

Something Borrowed, Something Blue

WE English-speaking people are the greatest beggars, borrowers, and stealers of language in the history of the world; we are gluttons for other people's words. Just look at these which I spotted in five minutes or so as I glanced at the newspaper propped up in front of me at breakfast this morning: *dinghy*, *bungalow*, *pageant*, *hurricane*, *chocolate*, *taboo*, *boomerang*, *berserk*, *checkmate*, *ukulele*, *bonanza*.

Every one of those words was stolen! We had the first three from India—dinghy comes from Bengali, bungalow and pageant from Hindi. Our mariners long ago encountered hurricanes in the Caribbean and brought back the Taino word with them which means incidentally an evil spirit of the sea.

Chocolate comes from the Mexican word chocolatl, and was originally a food made by mixing the seeds of cacua-atle with those of a tree called puchotl. The word is like a ghostly whisper from a dead civilisation—that of the Aztecs, many of whose words, incidentally, seem to end strongly in tl.

Taboo means sacred in Tongan; Captain Cook brought it home to England from one of his Pacific voyages.

Boomerang is aboriginal Australian, of course; my newspaper has been using it as an English verb! Berserk comes from Malay, in which language it means furious. Checkmate is corrupted Arabic, which we got by way of Persian; the phrase was Al-shah mat, " the King is dead."

Ukulele is a pleasing word. I'm glad we stole it from the pretty girls of Hawaii, in whose language, in fact, it signifies a flea—uku, an insect + lele, to jump or fly. The instrument got its name, apparently, because the quick action of the fingers suggested the jumping of fleas!

Bonanza is a fairly new acquisition. In Spanish it means fair weather at sea, prosperity. We stole it only the other day, to the joy of our newspapers, who can now convey this impression of " a great stroke of good fortune " in a single word.

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I could have found in the paper a score more words looted from other languages, I am sure; but I'd finished breakfast, which consisted, by the way, of *kedgeree.* Kedgeree is from India, Hindi khichri, a rice dish with fish, flavoured with sesame. And what is sesame? It is an East Indian plant with an old Semitic name. A sweet oil was pressed out of its seeds, and this oil was supposed to have magic qualities, so that in *The Arabian Nights,* "Open Sesame!" becomes the password which opens the door of the robbers' cave.

But those Forty Thieves can't hold a candle to us, when it comes to stealing!

Three Flowers

HAS IT ever struck you how charming and how apt are these three flower names—*rosemary, dandelion, primrose*? Each one is an example of how the English language takes over other people's words and bends them to its own delightful purposes.

Rosemary was originally ros marinus, Latin for sea-dew, because the plant lived by the sea. However, we can rarely resist the temptation of making rose out of any syllable that sounds like it, while marinus suggested Mary—another name we love—so we dedicated the herb to the Virgin and made a word fit for poets to use:

For you there's rosemary and rue; these keep
Seeming and savour all the winter long.

Primrose, I suppose, was originally Latin too; prima rosa, the first rose—though it came to us through French. But there's truly something prim about primroses: primroses, you remember, that die unmarried, in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale.*

And look at dandelion. What an apt name for the show-off, shaggy, golden-maned bold flower! Of course we know it comes from the French dent-de-lion, because of the tooth-like, notched leaves. What a happy accident that we Englishmen couldn't pronounce French and decided to say the word in our own way.

The Tiger and The Deer

HUNTERS and poets have much in common—a sharp eye for the small significant things, a questioning mind that asks the why and the wherefore, and perhaps a sort of extra-sensory perception. There is certainly a poetic awareness behind our naming of many of the beasts.

Tiger probably comes from the same source as Tigris; and there's a heart-lifting suggestion that both originated from an Old Persian word meaning arrow. Arrowlike are the river's

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falls, and swift as an arrow loosed from the bow is the leap of the tiger!

Then there is the awe-inspiring derivation of *deer*. Some etymologists trace it back to a root dhus, to breathe; just as *animal* derives from the Latin anima, breath—a marvellously echoic word by the way, try breathing in and out as you say to yourself a-ni-ma. Originally a breath of air, anima came to mean the breath of life, and so the soul, the spirit.

That old root dhus may well be related to the Greek theos, a god. See how this chase of the deer leads us on into the philosophic and poetic mysteries. God is the breather-into, the animator of all, and the swift beautiful deer may well have seemed a personification of life itself, a symbol representing all respiration, pulse-beat, heart-beat, to the human slayer, hunter and poet, who stopped its heart beat for good.

Chawbacons and Cheeseparers

HERE are three words which surely sprang from the comic imaginations of simple people, countryfolk, I wouldn't mind betting, talking late at night in farmhouse or village inn—*chawbacon*, *cheeseparer*, *skinflint*. "She'd skin a flint and spoil a knife worth sixpence doing it!" So ran the old saying. Then somebody used a kind of shorthand, and joined skin and flint to make a noun which fairly sizzles with invective. The imagery is extravagant, almost poetic.

Cheeseparer is more homely and down-to-earth, but it conjures up in your mind a complete picture, not only of the niggard but of the horrible hunk of nearly-petrified mousetrap which he or more likely she so miserly pares.

As for chawbacon, it is like a caricature by Hogarth or Rowlandson. You can almost hear the relentless jaw chawing away, see the strong masseter muscle expand and contract, taste the nasty, salty, stringy, home-cured stuff.

The dictionary defines chawbacon as a country clown: a *bumpkin*. Another good word! Originally, it may have been Dutch, from bommekijn, a little barrel. Bumpkins were short stumpy folk. But the sound somehow suggests a rustic oafishness—compare the name Tony Lumpkin in *She Stoops to Conquer*—and nowadays the only bumpkins we know are country ones. There are also, apparently, *bumpkinets*—little bumpkins, or female ones. An article in *The Times* of 12th June 1881, describes someone called Peggy as, "a little, vulgar, country bumpkinet," which wasn't meant to be complimentary, but I confess that I find the diminutive rather endearing!

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"You will not care," he said,
"for the news I must tell you"

WHISTLING IN THE DARK

BY PETER DELIUS

AT THE Full Moon of Tabaung the Little Sisters learnt they would have to go. Mr. Po Gyi brought them the news on a hot morning, when the red laterite dust had turned the white frangipani blossoms that grew in the gardens of the Leper Asylum a pale pink. It had turned the white motor-car in which Mr. Po Gyi arrived a pale pink also. It was a very smart car. It had been requisitioned recently, when the banks were nationalised and taken over.

Mr. Po Gyi was feeling pleased with himself.

There had been opposition: these were good women who went round the town and took care of the sick and homeless. The leper is always homeless, because his own family will have nothing to do with him. Moreover the Asylum was self-supporting—it gave much and asked nothing in return.

Many of the older members of the new government had been against treating the Little Sisters like all the other foreigners, but Mr. Po Gyi was adamant and, as he was now head of the Government Health Department, he got his way.

"And when you have sent these women away, who will take charge?" asked Dr. Ludaw, who ran the general hospital. "We are not permitted to take these cases."

"It will be arranged. I shall see to it all. I have it in mind," Mr. Po Gyi assured him. "We shall put our own people in. The foreigners must all go."

Mr. Po Gyi wore European clothes nowadays. A chalk-striped grey flannel suit, a blue shirt with a scarlet tie. They did not suit him as well as the gay silk longyi, and the neat black silk jacket that had been his usual attire. Moreover they were very hot. But now that he had an important job he must dress up to it, he pointed out to his wife who did not care for the change.

As head of the new Government Health Department he was an

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important person. Admittedly he knew very little about health, but he was reading many books—when he had time; a newly-married man has not a great deal of time for reading. He had picked up a smattering of hygiene during the short time he worked at the Leper Asylum for the Little Sisters. After he left he had gone through hard times. Then freedom came. He had influential friends. Good fortune came to him, so that now at last he could marry, have good clothes, and a motor-car, so that he could live in his village some way out of the town and drive in daily: a Big Man.

Only one thing remained necessary to complete happiness—the paying-off of an old score. On this hot morning of the Full Moon of Tabaung, Mr. Po Gyi was on his way to do it.

The Little Sisters were most of them French, with the exception of Sister Eglantine. The Reverend Mother came of an aristocratic Norman family, and had been beautiful. Why she chose to spend her life among the outcasts of an Eastern city, no one knew. Sister Monique, Sister Eglantine, and Sister Maria-Benvenuta made up the staff, along with the Postulant Sisters newly out from home. Young, they were, with flower faces on which time had so far written nothing much.

It was Sister Eglantine that Mr. Po Gyi was after. She came from Ireland, a great grenadier of a woman, impetuous and hasty in her manners. He had disliked her even before she found him out. For one thing, he barely came up to the thick black cord with its three knots that encircled her large waist. No woman had any right to be that size, thought Mr. Po Gyi. He thought it again as she opened the heavy nail-studded door to him, just as he had hoped she would.

"Good morning. Perhaps you do not remember me?" he said, and he laughed merrily, which was something he always did when he was not quite sure how things would turn out.

"Certainly I remember you, and by the looks of you, you profited by the lesson I gave you," said Sister Eglantine.

He followed her down the painfully clean passage, smelling of furniture polish and disinfectant, the whole spiced with incense, that brought memory back in a flood.

He had been sixteen, a bright boy good at figures, when he came to the Leper Asylum to help with the accounts. The Little Sisters were trained nurses and doctors. The Reverend Mother was a specialist in tropical diseases—but there was not one among them could add a column of figures and make it come the same twice.

Very convenient that had been for Mr. Po Gyi. Not that his pilferings were on any grand scale. It was a pya here and a

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pya there, but he might have moved on to larger sums if Sister Eglantine had not suddenly arrived. From Cork. With a mathematical degree . . .

"All right! All right! Send me to prison! Call the police!" had shrieked Po Gyi, who was only brave when he was not frightened, and now he was very frightened indeed. Once get your name on the police list, and the outlook was poor.

"Sure, I'll be after doing nothing of the kind," said Sister Eglantine. "I'll just give you a lesson myself, without any help from the police force. Something you can remember that will help you to leave off your evil ways," said Sister Eglantine.

It was very humiliating. She whisked him over her enormous lap where he lay like a fish on a plate, and gave him a walloping with her large, hard hand. After which she righted him, and gave him a homily on honesty.

Naturally he ran away next day.

"I am a proud man," thought Mr. Po Gyi, remembering it.

The Reverend Mother's office looked out on a wide verandah where the convalescents lay in the sun on their mats. The distant murmur of their voices, mingled with the despairing cry of the Hot Weather Bird, reached Mr. Po Gyi as he waited for the Reverend Mother to finish the business in hand and attend to him.

Mr. Po Gyi was disappointed in the effect of his bombshell. He had expected considerable drama, but the Little Sisters did not storm or cry. The Reverend Mother, seated at her desk, her beautiful hands folded in front of her, looked at him for a long, disconcerting minute over her glasses.

"Everybody has to go," said Mr. Po Gyi, speaking loudly because he was nervous. "It is the law. No foreigners will be given work permits any more."

"Who will take over here? I must see them. The treatment of this sickness is a very specialised one, as I am sure you know. Properly administered, many cases can be cured."

"It will be seen to. Those partially cured can go back to their families with their medicines and be looked after at home. For the rest . . ."

"Come," the Reverend Mother interrupted him briskly, "you know very well no family will harbour one of its members who contracts this sickness. Even when they are properly cured it is rarely possible for them to go home. Although with reasonable care there is no danger, people do not believe this."

"Where, out here, would you get reasonable care?" Sister Eglantine exploded.

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The Reverend Mother silenced her with a raised hand.

"It is the law. All foreigners must go," said Mr. Po Gyi. "My Department will take over here and everything will be all right." He laughed merrily, which was what he always did when he was not quite sure what would happen next.

"Then give us a little more time—a chance to work with whoever is coming in here, and to show them the use of the new medicines. Many of the cured patients act as orderlies for us, but they will be afraid of strangers. Three days is not sufficient."

"I am sorry. It is arranged," said Mr. Po Gyi, and dropped his second bombshell. "The tickets have been purchased for you, the cabins booked. On Wednesday, a.m. There can be no delay. Here now are all the people very savage for freedom and self-government. It is the cry of our country."

The Reverend Mother walked over to the window when he had left them. She stood with her hands in her wide sleeves, looking out across the verandah to the well-kept garden. She could see old Simeon pottering about. There were things he could do, although he was blind as well as deaf. He could sweep the paths, and gather potatoes, as long as someone led him down in the morning and brought him back for the mid-day rice, and again at night. No one knew how long old Simeon had been there. The Reverend Mother had inherited him along with the place, and other problems. What would happen to old Simeon now? He was cured of the disease, and no longer infectious, but he was not pleasant to look at—a leper white as snow.

"How can we go and leave them!" cried Sister Maria-Benvenuta. She was the kindergarten Sister. "I will offer to remain here alone, Mother. I will work under anyone they care to put above me, if they will let me stay with the children."

"The people no longer want us, and so we must go," said the Reverend Mother slowly. "There is nothing we can do—save pray for them and their new-found freedom."

"Freedom!" cried Sister Eglantine, explosively. "Freedom! "Freedom!" She stamped off and her large feet made a clappering on the stone. The Reverend Mother looked after her with a little smile. Sister Eglantine was not one to whom resignation came easily.

The fifteen narrow black boxes were brought out and packed. Each contained all the worldly goods of the Sister whose name was painted on it in white letters. Each was so fashioned that, when the time came, it would serve as its owner's coffin. Large posters appeared on the gates of the Asylum, stating that it would reopen under entirely new management, but nobody paid any

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attention to them, for the majority of those who came and went could not read.

The Reverend Mother went round the long verandahs, where those who were cured had their sleeping-mats, and down the long wards, where those under treatment lay, and she tried to explain what was happening. The Postulant Sisters went round, filling the rice bowls, attending to the dressings for the last time. Sister Monique laid the slides with their smears of the day's tests on the scrubbed wooden shelf in the surgery, each marked with the date and the number of the patient.

Only old Simeon seemed to sense that something was wrong. He followed the Reverend Mother around like a faithful dog, his rice bowl in his hand. Being blind, he was always afraid that once he put it down he would never find it again.

"How can we tell them? How can we make them understand? They do not know what we are saying," wept Sister Monique. "No one can make old Simeon understand. He will think we have gone away and deserted him."

"I will make very special mention of Simeon to the new staff," said the Reverend Mother. "I will write out his routine, so that nothing will be changed."

But on Wednesday morning, when the handover was to take place, nobody turned up except Mr. Po Gyi. Everything he had felt sure would be so easy had turned out not to be easy at all. No one fancied working amongst the lepers. He had neither doctor, nor nurses, nor orderlies. He had talked the business over with Mahla his wife, half hoping she would offer to help him out, but she had looked at him with horror.

"I cannot touch this thing," she said, "it is not safe."

"With these new medicines . . ." Mr. Po Gyi assured her, but Mahla was not interested in modern medicines, and for two days and nights she had been very cold with him. So he was feeling a little depressed when he drove to the Leper Asylum that morning.

"The new staff—the people who will take over?" said the Reverend Mother. "Where are they? There are many instructions we must give them, regarding the running of the place. Sister Monique must speak with the doctor. There are slides of newly-made tests in the surgery. These need careful handling —they could be dangerous."

He hardly listened to her, he was so anxious to hustle them off, to be rid of them. "For the present, I am taking over. You can hand the keys to me. I will see to it all. All in good time."

"But—we cannot leave them like this. Many are very sick," said the Reverend Mother, shaken.

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"I cannot leave my children. I will not go," sobbed Sister Maria-Benvenuta.

"I shall see to everything," said Mr. Po Gyi. He hustled them away. The fifteen long black boxes were loaded on to the lorry. The Little Sisters climbed up after them. There was nothing left them but to go.

When the lorry finally disappeared in a cloud of dust and he was sure the Little Sisters were away, Mr. Po Gyi jangled his keys grandly, and for a while his depression lifted. There were so many things at the Asylum he had wanted to see, but when he had worked there he was kept strictly in his place in the office beside the gates. Curious stories had gone round about the surgery. There were said to be arms and legs there, and babies in bottles, and at last he had a chance of a look at these things.

It proved very disappointing. The place was spotlessly clean. Great baskets full of snow-white dressings stood on the centre table. Shelves along the walls carried bottles and jars of salve. The locked cupboards contained an assortment of powders and liquids Mr. Po Gyi felt it might be wise not to touch. On a scrubbed wooden tray lay a number of glass slides covered with strange smears of which he could make nothing. As he turned away the sleeve of his chalk-striped suit caught the end of the tray and sent it with a smash to the floor.

Guiltily Mr. Po Gyi knelt and scooped up the pieces, until he remembered there was no one to scold him, because there was nobody there. But suddenly, for no particular reason, the place gave him the horrors. He hurried away to the store cupboard, pleased to see how well stocked it was with things no longer obtainable in the bazaar. He helped himself to a tin of Rich Tea Biscuits as a peace-offering to Mahla, and drove away. For a few days everything would be all right. The sick would be looked after by the less sick, and those who were cured could go back to their own families. He would see to it. Presently. All in good time.

He opened the tin and helped himself to a biscuit. It was only then that he noticed he had cut his hand on the broken glass in the surgery. It was bleeding quite a bit, and he sucked it and then tied his handkerchief round it, and drove to his house in the village some way from the town. For it was the Full Moon of Tabaung, when everybody has a holiday.

Back in the Leper Asylum, the cooks cooked the rice for three days, but then it was finished and, as nobody gave out any more, they ran away. In the wards the patients sat around, waiting for the Little Sisters to come back. Old Simeon felt his way along the walls into Reverend Mother's office; she was not there, nor

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Sister Eglantine in the store, nor Sister Monique in the surgery.

Presently those who could walk unaided took what they could find and went back to the Pagoda steps to join the beggars. Only the gardener remained but he would not touch the sick. He himself was cured of the disease, and afraid it might come back to him. He was a good man, sorry for old Simeon who wandered about, unable to find food for himself, so in the end he did what seemed for the best. He got a small boy, and gave him the little bell that is rung in the streets to warn that a leper is coming, so that those who cannot bear to look on him may turn their faces to the wall. He gave the small boy five pyas to take the old man along to the Pagoda steps, where the Little Sisters had found him more than thirty years ago.

It was not that Mr. Po Gyi forgot all about the place. He did not. It was very much on his mind, but so were a great many other matters. The hot weather parched the countryside and sapped men's energies, and Mr. Po Gyi had not had much to start with. Next time he visited the Asylum he found it changed. The big gates had been left open. A lot of goats had moved in, and some villagers had tethered their cows there. Gone were the bright flowers and the well-stocked vegetable garden, and gone also were all the lepers. It had not turned out at all the way Mr. Po Gyi had intended, but he was frankly rather glad about the lepers, because he simply had not known what to do about them. No one would consider taking charge of the place for him. No one would work there. He had had no idea it would all be so difficult. The Pagoda steps were, after all, the place most of them had come from, so maybe it did not matter a great deal that they had all gone back there.

He pushed the whole thing to the back of his mind. One day he would do something about it. All in good time, but not just now. The business of the Health Department was all he could manage, and that was a bit too much for him. He was feeling quite worn out. Peace and quiet was all he wanted, to sit on the verandah of his house, and have Mahla take his head in her two cool hands; to forget his endless worries and bothers.

At the time of the Festival of Lights, when everyone decorated their houses so that the towns and villages looked like clusters of stars, Mahla said suddenly, "Why do you walk like a lame man?"

He had hardly noticed the odd numbness in his leg. It had been just a slight inconvenience, but now that she mentioned it, he realised it had been bothering him quite a lot.

"You must see the doctor," Mahla said.

"Presently, presently. All in good time. When the holidays

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are over," he told her. For some reason, he was unwilling to go to the big hospital in the town. He went to the priest at the Pagoda, who gave him two charms and a prayer written on a piece of palm leaf. "It is the heat, and all my hard work and worry," Mr. Po Gyi told himself. "When the cold season comes, I shall be better."

But he was not better, and because of his reluctance to see Dr. Ludaw at the general hospital in the town, it was well into the cold weather before he brought himself there.

Dr. Ludaw examined him, and made various tests, some negligible, some painful. Then he sat for some time, looking at Mr. Po Gyi over his glasses.

"You will not care for the news that I must tell you," he said. "I myself will speak on the telephone with your wife. I will send her the medicines and the instructions, so that she will know what to do. We cannot keep you in this hospital. We are not permitted here to treat leprosy."

"But how can this thing come? I have not come into contact . . ."

"At some time," said Dr. Ludaw heavily, for he was sorry for him, "you have come into contact. It is the early stages with you. With care and treatment . . ."

Mr. Po Gyi got into his big white car that had been requisitioned when the banks were taken over, and drove out to his house in the jungle. He was a little surprised to find it in darkness. In his hurt, shocked condition he longed for Mahla as he had never longed for her before. She would take care of him, and cure him. He wanted her arms about him, and her cool soft voice.

He tried the door, but it was fastened and bolted. The windows were closed. Under a stone a message was scrawled in Mahla's high school handwriting.

The Doctor has spoken with me. You cannot come with the sickness here. You must go to the hospital and get cured first. It is too dangerous for me, with the child that is coming. I go to my Mother's house . . .

Mr. Po Gyi sat down on the doorstep. The numbness that had been in his legs was spreading now up to his thigh. He had not noticed before how much it was spreading. He had no idea where to go, or what to do. But the moon coming up over the tall palm trees shone on the tapering gold of the small pagoda, and he remembered there was a rest house there, where pilgrims came to spend the night and break their journey.

As soon as he reached the rest house he knew that tidings of his affliction had already gone round. Those already there moved away from him with their cooking pots and sleeping mats.

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Presently the old priest himself came down, wrapped against the evening chill in his orange robe.

"You cannot remain here, my son. The people are very frightened of this sickness."

"But it is not infectious," said Mr. Po Gyi. "It does not go that way, from a man to another man."

"Then how have you got it?" asked the priest gently. That was just what Mr. Po Gyi did not know. He thought uphill and downhill, but never came to any conclusion.

"I can give you a charm . . ," the old man suggested.

"I have already had the charm, and it did not do much good," said Mr. Po Gyi. "Where can I go? My wife also is afraid and has run away from me and shut my house."

"Listen, my son. I will tell you what to do," said the old man. He lived a hermit's life in his monastery and knew little of what went on in the new world springing up outside. "On the riverbanks outside the big town they tell me there is a hospital where they treat this disease and have brought about many wonderful cures. It is kept by the Jesus-Christ ladies, who are not afraid of this thing. They will cure you. You are in the beginning of the sickness and they have good drugs sent them from overseas. That is where you must go. That is the only place."

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EAST WEST . . .

Nothing delighted me more about Russia than getting a visa to go there. Some four weeks after my application, and one week before I was due to fly, I rang up again to the Consulate. "Could I speak to somebody about a visa?" Long pause. Then a second voice said, "The man you want to speak to is not here. Please ring back in five minutes." "Thank you," I said, "and what name should I ask for?" The voice thought a bit and replied in a sombre way, "Nobody." After five minutes I rang again and after speaking to the first voice, found myself put through to a third voice, no doubt the missing nobody. He was friendliness itself. "I'm sorry Mr. West, but we have not yet heard from Moscow about your visa." Nothing dismayed, I said, "Very well, what do you think is best? Shall I keep ringing you, or will you ring me as soon as you hear from Moscow?" The third voice answered, "Listen Mr. West, the best thing is, when we hear from Moscow, you ring us."

RICHARD WEST, *Globetrotter's Diary*

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She screamed only the once . . .

HIDDEN HANDS

BY L. P. DAVIES

I AM.

For a long time—what is "time?"—I was nothing. Now I am something.

I am something with shape and substance and the start of a faculty. I have a thought that coils and reaches out, exploring, entwining in other outside thoughts.

I cannot see; what is "see?" I cannot hear; what is "hear?"

But there is understanding and reason and so I begin the slow business of learning about things outside myself. And what I learn I never forget. Now I have a memory-mind; only small at first, but growing, growing quickly. I know that I am something alive that breathes and eats and drinks and reasons.

I don't know who I am. More than anything else I want to learn who I am. I gather in the outside thoughts and store them away, but they don't tell me who I am.

There are two separate kinds of outside thoughts which communicate with each other. One is strong, virile, youthful, dominating the other which is old, timid and almost always afraid.

They have names, these two sets of so very different thoughts. One, the young one, is "Ethel." The other is called "Father." All of Ethel's thoughts are hard and positive and often vicious. When I listen to them—and I have to listen for there is no way of closing my mind—they fill me with discomfort. I have learnt to dislike Ethel. But I like Father. He is the one who feeds me.

Father looks after me, but only when Ethel isn't there. I cannot discover why it is that he always does it secretly; his thoughts, when he is feeding me, are confused and filled with fear to the exclusion of everything else. He is afraid that she will find out what he is doing.

Now I know what "time" is. I sense a period of warmth and light, and another period when I am alone, free from outside thoughts, and there is darkness. Time is the passing from one period to the other.

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Father feeds me three times during each period of light.

I absorb the food, digesting it quickly, turning it into growth and intelligence. I have meanings for many of the words they use to each other because they make pictures in their minds while they speak. But there are some words for which there are no pictures: "Monday" and "lie" "place" "trust" and "empty."

There is no picture for "love," but I have found its meaning. Father loves me, and I love him. When he brings the food I can sense how his mind reaches out to me, warm and enfolding, talking to me, talking about the past when I was still here, but not as I am now. He has a great love for me because of the past. His love fills me with comfort and peace and happiness.

But it is not good when I talk to him in return and he doesn't listen. And this is something I am unable to understand.

There is no love in me for Ethel.

She touches me sometimes, for all I am sure she doesn't know I am here. And I have heard her mind wondering whether or not to destroy me. So I have become afraid of her, and have learnt hate. I am afraid because as yet I have no way of protecting myself. Weak and vulnerable I wait, listening and learning, coming to understand how some of the outside thoughts become words while others are there but unspoken.

"For heaven's sake get out of the house, Father, while I try to clean up this pig-sty. I can't do with having you under my feet all the time." . . . He gets more of a damned nuisance every day.

"But it's raining, Ethel." . . . Why can't she let me have five minutes' peace?

"A drop of rain won't do you any harm." . . . He could easily catch pneumonia. They couldn't blame me if he got soaking wet and caught his death. They might, though . . . "Then go up to your bedroom out of my way. And don't turn the fire on; we can't afford to waste electric. Have you taken your medicine this morning?" . . . They won't be able to say I didn't try to do my best for him.

"I've taken it, Ethel." . . . Why does she have to keep on at me all the time?

"Let me see the bottle for myself; I know I can't trust you." . . . I don't know why I bother with the old fool . . ." Now off with you upstairs and leave that filthy pipe behind. I won't have ashes all over the bedclothes." . . . I wish he'd die and have done with it . . .

Light and darkness follow each other. "Day" and "night," they are called. I still don't know who I am. When Father talks to me he doesn't use a name; he thinks of me as "it." He feeds

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me regularly, and every day I grow stronger and more intelligent.

I am growing a " hand." I cannot see it but I know by the feel that it isn't the same sort of hand that Ethel and Father picture when they use the word. Now I am not quite so afraid of Ethel as I was at first. But still I am careful because my hand—hands, for now there are two of them—are still undeveloped and weak. So during the day I keep them coiled and hidden, only experimenting with them at night when I am alone.

The days pass by. From time to time a third set of thoughts comes to join the other two. They belong to someone called " Doctor." He doesn't know I'm here. His thoughts bring words for which there are no pictures, "vitamins," "hormones," "liver."

I still keep my hands—a cluster of them, now—hidden during the day. But every night I use them. They are long enough for me to reach out to touch things. There are different textures to be tested; something smooth and soft that affords no grip. And there is something hard and curved. When I grasp it it holds firm, so that when I pull . . . With an effort I can raise myself a little. I can move. But with the knowledge comes a warning, an instinct that tells me it is dangerous to try to move too much. Not for a while, at least; not until I have become stronger.

I have learnt to count the days. I can count up to thirty. My hands—I think of them as that for want of a better word—have lengthened, becoming strong and wiry.

It is a daytime now, a morning, and Father is feeding me. As is usual, when that is happening, we are alone. I try once again to talk to him, and this time I almost make him understand. Disbelief turmoils his mind and makes his hands tremble so that he has to stop the feeding.

And then Ethel is here, and I can feel how her thoughts first waver and then gather themselves into a tight ball of anger.

Father is afraid of her; his thoughts shrivel into fear.

But I am not frightened.

She is close by me, but I can move and I am strong and powerful, and so I am no longer afraid of what she might do to me.

" Father! " Her anger explodes in my mind. Her hands are rough on me . . . " So this is how you've been wasting your good medicine . . . Pouring it away into that plant-pot . . ."

My hands, all of them, are extended, rigid and hard, reaching out and grasping. She screams, only the once, but very loudly. And then suddenly her mind is empty of everything.

Now there are two more words for me to learn.

What is " death? " And what is an " aspidistra? "

I am.

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S *is for* SPRING

S is for Spring
The Swift's on the wing
The garden is Sprouting, with all that entails
The mowers are whirring
All nature is Stirring,
eSpecially Sparrows, eSpecially Snails.

ROSIE LEE

Sparrows and . . .

There are always far too many sparrows in my garden and as they frequently molest other species and, in spring, drive away the migrants that might stay to nest, I never encourage them and do not allow them long on the bird-table. I have only to show the crook of my walking-stick and shout, "Sparrows" for them all to fly away. The other species remain. It is the crook of my stick that the sparrows fear. This dates back eleven years to the time when a young sparrow refused to come out from under my bed and I pulled it out on the crook of my stick and put it outside. Ever since that day, all the sparrows of all the flocks that come to my garden have feared the sight of the crook in my hand.

Every year I have battles with the sparrows to prevent them from building under the dormer window tiles. One pair, called Grimes and Nogood, at last learnt that this was forbidden. Last year I saw Grimes, the male, perched on this window with a straw in his beak. I shouted, "No. Not there!" He looked down at me, dropped the straw, gave a squawk and flew to the hedge.

LEN HOWARD, *Living with Birds*

Snails

A garden is a lovesome thing? What rot!
Weed plot,
Scum pool,
Old pot,
Snail-shiny stool
In pieces; yet the fool
Contends that snails are not—
Not snails! in gardens! when the eve is cool?
Nay, but I see their trails!
'Tis very sure my garden's full of snails!

J. A. LINDON, *My Garden*

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RAYMOND CHANDLER

Continuing Argosy's enthralling series

No3

KILLER IN THE RAIN

THIS month's story, Killer in the Rain, is one of Raymond Chandler's earliest. It originally appeared in Black Mask, in January 1935. Later, he used part of this plot, together with part of another story, The Curtain — look out for it next month in our series of vintage Chandler stories now reprinted for the first time — in the construction of The Big Sleep.

Though early, Killer in the Rain is no prentice piece—the famous rugged style is as hardboiled, the plot is as intricate, as in Chandler's best-known work.

WE were sitting in a room at the Berglund. I was on the side of the bed, and Dravec was in the easy chair. It was my room.

Rain beat very hard against the windows. They were shut tight and it was hot in the room and I had a little fan going on the table. The breeze from it hit Dravec's face high up, lifted his heavy black hair, moved the longer bristles in the fat path of eyebrow that went across his face in a solid line. He looked like a bouncer who had come into money.

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He showed me some of his gold teeth and said, " What you got on me? "

He said it importantly, as if anyone who knew anything would know quite a lot about him.

" Nothing," I said. " You're clean, as far as I know."

He lifted a large hairy hand and stared at it solidly for a minute. " You don't get me. A feller named M'Gee sent me here. Violets M'Gee."

" Fine. How is Violets these days? " Violets M'Gee was a homicide dick in the sheriff's office.

He looked at his large hand and frowned. " No—you still don't get it. I got a job for you."

" I don't go out much any more," I said. " I'm getting kind of frail."

He looked around the room carefully, bluffing a bit, like a man not naturally observant. " Maybe it's money," he said.

" Maybe it is," I said.

He had a belted suède raincoat on. He tore it open carelessly and got out a wallet that was not quite as big as a bale of hay. Currency stuck out of it at careless angles. When he slapped it down on his knee it made a fat sound that was pleasant to the ear. He shook money out of it, selected a few bills, stuffed the rest back, dropped the wallet on the floor and let it lie, arranged five century notes like a tight poker hand and put them under the base of the fan on the table.

That was a lot of work. It made him grunt.

" I got lots of sugar," he said. " You know me now, huh? "

" A little better."

I got an envelope out of an inside pocket and read to him aloud from some scribbling on the back.

" Dravec, Anton or Tony. Former Pittsburgh steelworker, all-round muscle stiff. Made a wrong pass and got shut up. Left town, came west. Worked on an avocado ranch. Came up with a ranch of his own. Sat right on the dome when the oil boom burst. Got rich. Lost a lot of it buying into other people's dusters. Still has enough. Serbian by birth, six feet, one daughter, never known to have had a wife."

I lit a pipe.

" Jeeze," he said. " Where you promote all that? "

" Connections. What's the angle? "

He picked the wallet off the floor and moused around inside it with a couple of square fingers for a while, with his tongue sticking out between his thick lips. He finally got out a slim brown card and some crumpled slips of paper. He pushed them at me.

The card was in fancy type, very delicately done. It said: *Mr. Steiner*, and very small in the corner, *Rare Books and De Luxe Editions*. No address or phone number.

The white slips, three in number, were simple I.O.U.s for a thousand dollars each, signed *Carmen Dravec* in a sprawling, moronic handwriting.

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I gave it all back to him and said, " Blackmail? "

He shook his head slowly and something gentle came into his face that hadn't been there before. " It's my little girl—Carmen. This Steiner, he bothers her. She goes to his joint all the time, makes whoopee. I don't like it."

I nodded. " How about the notes? "

" I don't care nothin' about the dough. She plays games with him. The hell with that. She's what you call man-crazy. You go tell this Steiner to lay off Carmen. I break his neck with my hands. See? "

All this in a rush, with deep breathing. His eyes got small and round, and furious. His teeth almost chattered.

I said, " Why have me tell him? Why not tell him yourself? "

" Maybe I get mad and kill the ——! " he yelled.

I looked at him carefully for a moment, getting hold of an idea. " Nerts, you're scared to," I told him.

Both big fists came up. He held them shoulder high and shook them, great knots of bone and muscle. He lowered them slowly heaved a deep honest sigh, and said, " Yeah, I'm scared to. I dunno how to handle her. All the time some new guy and all the time a punk. A while back I gave a guy called Joe Marty five grand to lay off her. She's still mad at me."

I stared at the window, watched the rain hit it, flatten out, and slide down in a thick wave, like melted gelatine. It was too early in the fall for that kind of rain.

" Giving them sugar doesn't get you anywhere," I said. " You could be doing that all your life. So you figure you'd like to have me get rough with this one, Steiner."

" Tell him I break his neck! "

" I wouldn't bother," I said. " I know Steiner. I'd break his neck for you myself, if it would do any good."

He leaned forward and grabbed my hand. His eyes got childish. A grey tear floated in each of them.

" Listen, M'Gee says you're a good guy. I tell you something I ain't told nobody—ever. Carmen—she's not my kid at all. I just picked her up in Smoky, a little baby in the street. She didn't have nobody. I guess maybe I steal her, huh? "

" Sounds like it," I said, and had to fight to get my hand loose. I rubbed feeling back into it with the other one. The man had a grip that would crack a telephone pole.

" I go straight then," he said grimly, and yet tenderly. " I come out here and make good. She grows up. I love her."

I said, " Uh-huh. That's natural."

" You don't get me. I wanta marry her."

I stared at him.

" She gets older, get some sense. Maybe she marry me? "

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His voice implored me, as if I had the settling of that.

"Ever ask her?"

"I'm scared to," he said humbly.

"She soft on Steiner, do you think?"

He nodded. "But that don't mean nothin'."

He stood up clumsily, swung his hat and stared down at my feet.

"You take him off my back. He ain't her sort, anyway."

"It might hurt your back a little."

"That's O.K. That's what it's for," he said.

He buttoned himself up, dumped his hat on his big shaggy head, and rolled on out. He shut the door carefully, as if he was going out of a sick-room.

I thought he was as crazy as a pair of waltzing mice, but I liked him.

I put his goldbacks in a safe place, mixed myself a long drink, and sat down in the chair that was still warm from him.

While I played with the drink I wondered if he had any idea what Steiner's racket was.

Steiner had a collection of rare and half-rare smut books which he loaned out as high as ten dollars a day—to the right people.

IT rained all the next day. Late in the afternoon I sat parked in a blue Chrysler roadster, diagonally across the Boulevard from a narrow store front, over which a green neon sign in script letters said, *Mr. Steiner*.

The rain splashed knee-high off the sidewalks, filled the gutters, and big cops in slickers that shone like gun barrels had a lot of fun carrying little girls in silk stockings and cute little rubber boots across the bad places, with a lot of squeezing.

The rain drummed on the hood of the Chrysler, beat and tore at the taut material of the top, leaked in at the buttoned places, and made a pool on the floorboards for me to keep my feet in.

I had a big flask of Scotch with me. I used it often enough to keep interested.

Steiner did business, even in that weather; perhaps especially in that weather. Very nice cars stopped in front of his store, and very nice people dodged in, then dodged out again with wrapped parcels under their arms. Of course, they could have been buying rare books and de luxe editions.

At five-thirty a pimply-faced kid in a leather windbreaker came out of the store and sloped up the sidestreet at a fast trot. He came back with a neat cream and grey coupé. Steiner came out and got into the coupé. He wore a dark green leather raincoat, a cigarette in an amber holder, no hat. I couldn't see his glass eye at that distance but I knew he had one. The kid in the windbreaker held an umbrella over him across the sidewalk, then shut it up and handed it into the coupé.

Steiner drove west on the Boulevard. I drove west on the Boulevard. Past the business district he turned north, and I

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tailed him easily from a block back. I was pretty sure he was going home, which was natural.

He took a curving ribbon of wet cement called La Verne Terrace, climbed up it almost to the top. It was a narrow road with a high bank on one side and a few well-spaced cabin-like houses built down the steep slope on the other side. Their roofs were not much above road level. The fronts were masked by shrubs. Sodden trees dripped all over the landscape.

Steiner's hideaway had a square box hedge in front of it, more than window-high. The entrance was a sort of maze, and the house door was not visible from the road. Steiner put his grey and cream coupé in a small garage, locked up, went through the maze with his umbrella up, and light went on in the house.

I went into a conference with my flask of Scotch, and then just sat.

At six-fifteen lights bobbed up the hill. It was quite dark by then. A car stopped in front of Steiner's hedge. A slim, tall girl in a slicker got out of it. Enough light filtered through the hedge for me to see that she was dark-haired and possibly pretty.

Voices drifted on the rain and a door shut. I got out of the Chrysler, put a pencil flash into her car. It was a dark maroon or brown Packard convertible. Its licence read to Carmen Dravec. I went back to my car.

A solid, slow-moving hour crawled by. No more cars came up or down the hill. It seemed to be a very quiet neighbourhood.

Then a single flash of hard white light leaked out of Steiner's house, like a flash of summer lightning. As the darkness fell again a thin tinkling scream trickled down the darkness and echoed faintly among the wet trees. I was out of the Chrysler and on my way before the last echo of it died.

There was no fear in the scream. It held the note of a half-pleasurable shock, an accent of drunkenness, and a touch of pure idiocy.

The Steiner mansion was perfectly silent when I hit the gap in the hedge, dodged around the "elbow" that masked the front door, and put my hand up to bang on the door.

At that exact moment, as if somebody had been waiting for it, three shots racketed close together behind the door. After that there was a long, harsh sigh, a soft thump, rapid steps going away into the back of the house.

I wasted time hitting the door with my shoulder without enough start. It threw me back like a kick from an army mule.

The door fronted on a narrow runway, like a small bridge, that led from the banked road. There was no side porch, no way to get at the windows in a hurry. There was no way round to the back except through the house or up a long flight of wooden steps that went up to the back door from the alley-like street below. On these, I now heard a clatter of feet.

That gave me the impulse and I hit the door again, from the feet up. It gave at the lock and I pitched down two steps into a big,

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dim, cluttered room. I wandered through to the back of the house.

I was pretty sure there was death in it.

A car throbbed in the street below as I reached the back porch. The car went away fast, without lights. That was that. I went back to the living-room.

The room reached all the way across the front of the house and had a low, beamed ceiling, walls painted brown. Strips of tapestry hung all around the walls. Books filled low shelves. There was a thick, pinkish rug on which some light fell from two standing lamps with pale green shades. In the middle of the rug there was a big, low desk and at it a black chair with a yellow satin cushion. There were books all over the desk.

On a sort of dais near one end wall there was a teakwood chair with arms and a high back. A dark-haired girl was sitting in the chair, on a fringed red shawl.

She sat very straight, with her hands on the arms of the chair, her knees close together, her body stiffly erect, her chin level. Her eyes were wide open and mad and had no pupils.

She looked unconscious of what was going on, but she didn't have the pose of unconsciousness. She had a pose as if she was doing something very important and making a lot of it.

Out of her mouth came a tinny chuckling noise, which didn't change her expression or move her lips. She didn't seem to see me at all.

She was wearing a pair of long jade earrings, and apart from those she was stark naked.

I looked away from her to the other end of the room.

Steiner was on the floor, just beyond the edge of the pink rug, and in front of a thing that looked like a totem pole. It had a round open mouth in which the lens of a camera showed. The lens seemed to be aimed at the girl in the teakwood chair.

There was a flash-bulb apparatus on the floor beside Steiner's out-flung hand. The cord of the flash-bulb went behind the totem pole thing.

Steiner was wearing Chinese slippers with thick white felt soles. His legs were in black satin pyjamas and the upper part of him in an embroidered Chinese coat. The front of it was mostly blood. His glass eye shone brightly and was the most lifelike thing about him. At a glance none of the three shots had missed.

The flash-bulb was the sheet lightning I had seen leak out of the house and the half-giggling scream was the doped and naked girl's reaction to that. The three shots had been somebody else's idea of how the proceedings ought to be punctuated. Presumably the idea of the lad who had gone very fast down the back steps.

I could see something in his point of view. At that stage I thought it was a good idea to shut the front door and fasten it with the short chain that was on it. The lock had been spoilt by my violent entrance.

A couple of thin purple glasses stood on a red lacquer tray on one end of the desk. Also a pot-bellied flagon of something brown.

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The glasses smelt of ether and laudanum, a mixture I had never tried, but it seemed to fit the scene pretty well.

I found the girl's clothes on a divan in the corner, picked up a brown sleeved dress to begin with, and went over to her. She smelt of ether also, at a distance of several feet.

The tinny chuckling was still going on. I slapped her face, not very hard. I didn't want to bring her out of whatever kind of trance she was in into a screaming fit.

"Come on," I said brightly. "Let's be nice. Let's get dressed."

She said, "G-g-go—ter—ell," without any emotion that I could notice.

I slapped her a little more. She didn't mind the slaps, so I went to work getting the dress on her.

She didn't mind the dress either. She let me hold her arms up but she spread her fingers wide, as if that was very cute. It made me do a lot of finaygling with the sleeves. I finally got the dress on. I got her shoes on, and then got her up on her feet.

"Let's take a little walk," I said. "Let's take a nice little walk."

We walked. Part of the time her earrings banged against my chest and part of the time we looked like a couple of adagio dancers doing the splits. We walked over to Steiner's body and back. She didn't pay any attention to Steiner and his bright glass eye.

She found it amusing that she couldn't walk and tried to tell me about it, but only bubbled. I put her arm on the divan while I wadded her underclothes up and shoved them into a deep pocket of my raincoat, put her handbag in my other deep pocket. I went through Steiner's desk and found a little blue notebook written in code that looked interesting. I put that in my pocket, too.

Then I tried to get at the back of the camera in the totem pole, to get the plate, but couldn't find the catch. I was getting nervous, and I figured I could build up a better excuse if I ran into the law when I came back later to look for it than for any reason I could give if caught there now.

I went back to the girl and got her slicker on her, nosed around to see if anything else of hers was there, wiped away a lot of fingerprints I probably hadn't made, and at least some of those Miss Dravec must have made. I opened the door and put out both the lamps.

I got my left arm around her again and we struggled out into the rain and piled into her Packard. I didn't like leaving my own bus there very well, but that had to be.

Nothing happened on the way, except that Carmen stopped bubbling and giggling and went to snoring. I couldn't keep her head off my shoulder. It was all I could do to keep it out of my lap. I had to drive rather slowly and it was a long way anyhow, clear over to the west edge of the city.

The Dravec home was a large old-fashioned brick house in large grounds with a wall around them. A grey composition driveway went through iron gates and up a slope past flowerbeds and lawns to a big front door with narrow leaded panels on each side of it.

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There was dim light behind the panels as if nobody much was home.

I pushed Carmen's head into the corner and shed her belongings in the seat, and got out.

A maid opened the door. She said Mister Dravec wasn't in and she didn't know where he was. Downtown somewhere. She had a long, yellowish, gentle face, a long nose, no chin, and large wet eyes. She looked like a nice old horse that had been turned out to pasture after long service, and as if she would do the right thing by Carmen.

I pointed into the Packard and growled, " Better get her to bed. She's lucky we don't throw her in the can."

She smiled sadly and I went away.

I had to wait twenty-five minutes in the rain for a taxi. While I waited I began to worry about what I hadn't completed.

I had yet to get the used plate out of Steiner's camera.

I PAID the taxi off on Pepper Drive, in front of a house where there was company, and walked back up the curving hill of La Verne Terrace to Steiner's house behind its shrubbery.

Nothing looked any different. I went in through the gap in the hedge, pushed the door open gently, and smelt cigarette smoke.

It hadn't been there before. There had been a complicated set of smells, including the sharp memory of smokeless powder. But cigarette smoke hadn't stood out from the mixture.

I closed the door and slipped down on one knee and listened, holding my breath. I didn't hear anything but the sound of the rain on the roof. I tried throwing the beam of my pencil flash along the floor. Nobody shot at me.

I straightened up, found the dangling tassel of one of the lamps and made light in the room.

The first thing I noticed was that a couple of strips of tapestry were gone from the wall. I hadn't counted them, but the spaces where they had hung caught my eye.

Then I saw Steiner's body was gone from in front of the totem pole thing with the camera eye in its mouth. On the floor below, beyond the margin of the pink rug, somebody had spread down a rug over the place where Steiner's body had been. I didn't have to lift the rug to know why it had been put there.

I lit a cigarette and stood there in the middle of the dimly-lit room and thought about it. After a while I went to the camera in the totem pole. I found the catch this time. There wasn't any plate-holder in the camera.

I left the house, got into my rain-soaked car, and choked it to life.

It was all right with me if somebody wanted to keep the Steiner kill hush-hush for a while. It gave me a chance to find out whether I could tell it leaving Carmen Dravec and the nude photo angle out.

It was after ten when I got back to the Berglund and put my car away and went upstairs to the apartment. I stood under a shower, then put pyjamas on and mixed up a batch of hot grog.

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I filled a pipe and sat down with my hot grog and Steiner's little blue notebook. It was in code, but the arrangement of the entries and the indented leaves made it a list of names and addresses. There were over four hundred and fifty of them. If this was Steiner's sucker list, he had a goldmine—quite apart from the blackmail angles.

Any name on the list might be a prospect as the killer. I didn't envy the cops their job when it was handed to them.

I drank too much whisky trying to crack the code. About midnight I went to bed, and dreamt about a man in a Chinese coat with blood all over the front who chased a naked girl with long jade earrings while I tried to photograph the scene with a camera that didn't have any plate in it.

Violets M'Gee called me up in the morning, before I was dressed, but after I had seen the paper and not found anything about Steiner in it. His voice had the cheerful sound of a man who had slept well and didn't owe too much money.

"Well, how's the boy?" he began.

I said I was all right except that I was having a little trouble with my Third Reader. He laughed a little absently, and then his voice got too casual. "This guy Dravec that I sent over to see you—done anything for him yet?"

"Too much rain," I answered, if that was an answer.

"Uh-huh. He seems to be a guy that things happen to. A car belongin' to him is washin' about in the surf off Lido fish pier."

I didn't say anything. I held the telephone very tightly.

"Yeah," M'Gee went on cheerfully. "A nice new Cad all messed up with sand and sea-water . . . Oh, I forgot. There's a guy inside it."

I let my breath out slowly, very slowly. "Dravec?" I whispered.

"Naw. A young kid. I ain't told Dravec yet. Wanta run down and look at it with me?"

I said I would like to do that.

"I'll be seeing you," M'Gee told me and hung up.

Shaved, dressed and lightly breakfasted I was at the County Building in half an hour or so. I found M'Gee staring at a yellow wall and sitting at a little yellow desk on which there was nothing but M'Gee's hat and one of the M'Gee feet. He took both of them off the desk and we went down to the official parking lot and got into a small black sedan.

The rain had stopped during the night and the morning was all blue and gold. There was enough snap in the air to make life simple and sweet, if you didn't have too much on your mind. I had.

A motor-cycle officer was keeping the people off the pier. M'Gee showed him a bronze star and we went out along the pier, into a loud smell that even two days' rain had failed to wash away.

A low black tug crouched off the end of the pier. Something large and green and nickelled was on its deck in front of the wheelhouse. Men stood around it.

We went down slimy steps to the deck of the tug.

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M'Gee said hullo to a deputy in green khaki and another man in plain clothes. The tug crew of three moved over to the wheel-house, and set their backs against it, watching us.

We looked at the car. The front bumper was bent, and one headlight and the radiator shell. The paint and the nickel were scratched up by sand and the upholstery was sodden and black. Otherwise the car wasn't much the worse for wear. It was a big job in two tones of green, with a wine-coloured stripe.

M'Gee and I looked into the front part of it. A slim, dark-haired kid who had been good-looking was draped around the steering column, with his head at a peculiar angle to the rest of his body. His face was bluish-white. His eyes were a faint dull gleam under the lowered lids. His open mouth had sand in it. There were traces of blood on the side of his head which the sea-water hadn't quite washed away.

M'Gee backed away slowly, made a noise in his throat, and began to chew on a couple of the violet-scented breath purifiers that gave him his nickname. "What's the story?" he asked quietly.

The uniformed deputy pointed up to the end of the pier. Dirty white railings made of two-by-fours had been broken through in a wide space and the broken wood showed up yellow and bright.

"Went through there. Must have hit pretty hard, too. The rain stopped early down here, about nine, and the broken wood is dry inside. That puts it after the rain stopped. That's all we know except she fell in plenty of water not to be banged up worse; at least half-tide, I'd say. That would be right after the rain stopped. She showed under the water when the boys came down to fish this morning. We got the tug to lift her out. Then we find the dead guy."

The other deputy scuffed at the deck with the toe of his shoe. M'Gee looked sideways at me with foxy little eyes. I looked blank and didn't say anything.

"Pretty drunk that lad," M'Gee said gently. "Showin' off all alone in the rain. Yeah—pretty drunk."

"Drunk, hell," the plain-clothes deputy said. "The hand throttle's set halfway down and the guy's been sapped on the side of the head. Ask me and I'd call it murder."

M'Gee looked at him politely. "Frisked him? Know who he is?"

The two deputies looked at me, then at the tug crew.

"O.K. Save that part," M'Gee said. "I *know* who he is."

A small man with glasses and a tired face and a black bag came slowly along the pier and down the slimy steps. He picked out a fairly clean place on the deck and put his bag down. He took his hat off and rubbed the back of his neck and smiled wearily.

"There's your patient," M'Gee told him.

The medical examiner looked in at the dead man morosely. He fingered the head, moved it around a little, felt the man's ribs. He lifted one lax hand and stared at the fingernails. He let it fall, stepped back, and picked his bag up again.

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"About twelve hours," he said. "Broken neck, of course. I doubt if there's any water in him. Better get him out of there before he starts to get stiff on us. I'll tell you the rest when I get him on a table."

He went back up the steps, and along the pier.

M'Gee told the deputies to keep their mouths shut until they heard from him. We went back along the pier and got into the small black sedan and drove back towards the city along a white highway washed clean by the rain, past low rolling hills of yellow-white sand terraced with moss. A few gulls wheeled and swooped over something in the surf. Far out to sea a couple of white yachts on the horizon looked as if they were suspended in the sky.

We laid a few miles behind us without saying anything to each other. Then M'Gee cocked his chin at me and said, "Got ideas?"

"Loosen up," I said. "I never saw the guy before. Who is he?"

"Hell, I thought you was going to tell me about it."

"Loosen up, Violets," I said. He growled, shrugged.

"Dravec's chauffeur. A kid named Carl Owen. How do I know? We had him in the cooler a year ago. He run Dravec's daughter off to Yuma. Dravec went after them and brought them back and had the guy heaved in the goldfish bowl. Then the girl gets to him, and next morning the old man steams downtown and begs the guy off. Says the kid meant to marry her, only she wouldn't. Then, by heck, the kid goes back to work for him and been there ever since. What you think of that?"

"It sounds just like Dravec," I said.

"Yeah—but the kid could have had a relapse."

M'Gee had silvery hair and a knobby chin and a little pouting mouth made to kiss babies with. I looked at his face sideways, and suddenly I got his idea. I laughed.

"You think maybe Dravec killed him?" I asked.

"Why not? The kid makes another pass at the girl and Dravec cracks down at him too hard. He's a big guy and could break a neck easy. Then he's scared. He runs the car down to Lido in the rain and lets it slide off the end of the pier. Thinks it won't show. Maybe don't think at all. Just rattled."

"It's a kick in the pants," I said. "Then all he had to do was walk home thirty miles in the rain."

"Go on. Kid me."

"Dravec killed him, sure, but they were playing leap-frog! Dravec fell on him! Listen, Violets," I said seriously. "If the kid was murdered—and you're not sure it's murder at all—it's not Dravec's kind of crime. He might kill a man in a temper—but he'd let him lay. He wouldn't go to all that fuss."

We shuttled back and forth across the road while M'Gee thought about that.

"What a pal," he complained. "I have me a swell theory and look what you done to it. I wish the hell I hadn't brought you. Hell with you. I'm goin' after Dravec just the same."

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" Sure," I agreed. " You'd have to do that. But Dravec never killed that boy. He's too soft inside to cover up on it."

It was noon when we got back to town. I got off on the Boulevard and let M'Gee go on alone to see Dravec.

I ate lunch at a counter and looked casually at an early afternoon paper. I didn't expect to see anything about Steiner in it, and I didn't.

After lunch I walked along the Boulevard six blocks to have a look at Steiner's store.

It was a half-store frontage, the other half being occupied by a credit jeweller. The jeweller was standing in his entrance, a big, white-haired, black-eyed Jew with about nine carats of diamond on his hand. A faint, knowing smile curved his lips as I went past him into Steiner's.

A thick blue rug paved Steiner's from wall to wall. There were blue leather easy chairs with smoke stands beside them. A few sets of tooled leather books were put out on narrow tables. The rest of the stock was behind glass. A panelled partition with a single door in it cut off a back part of the store, and in the corner by this a woman sat behind a small desk with a hooded lamp on it.

She got up and came towards me, swinging lean thighs in a tight dress of some material that didn't reflect any light. She was an ash-blonde, with greenish eyes under heavily mascara-d lashes. There were large jet buttons in the lobes of her ears; her hair waved back smoothly from behind them. Her fingernails were silvered.

She gave me what she thought was a smile of welcome, but what I thought was a grimace of strain. " Was it something? "

I pulled my hat low over my eyes and fidgeted. I said, " Steiner? "

" He won't be in today. May I show you—"

" I'm selling," I said. " Something he's wanted for a long time."

The silvered fingernails touched the hair over one ear. " Oh, a salesman . . . Well, you might come in tomorrow."

" He sick? I could go up to the house," I suggested hopefully. " He'd want to see what I have."

That jarred her. She had to fight for her breath for a minute. But her voice was smooth enough when it came.

" That—that wouldn't be any use. He's out of town today."

I nodded, looked properly disappointed, touched my hat and started to turn away when the pimply-faced kid of the night before stuck his head through the door in the panelling. He went back as soon as he saw me, but not before I saw some loosely packed cases of books behind him on the floor of the back room.

The cases were small and open and packed any old way. A man in very new overalls was fussing with them. Some of Steiner's stock was being moved out.

I left the store and walked down to the corner, then back to the alley. Behind Steiner's stood a small black truck with wire sides. It didn't have any lettering on it. Boxes showed through the wire

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sides and, as I watched, the man in overalls came out with another one and heaved it up.

I went back to the Boulevard. Half a block farther on a fresh-faced kid was reading a magazine in a parked cab. I showed him money and said, "Tail job?"

He looked me over, swung his door open, and stuck his magazine behind the rear-vision mirror.

"My meat, boss," he said brightly.

We went around to the end of the alley and waited.

There were about a dozen boxes on the truck when the man in the very new overalls got up in front and gunned his motor. He went down the alley fast and turned left on the street at the end. My driver tailed from too far back.

I was telling him about that when the truck turned north. The street at which it turned was called Brittany. When we got to Brittany there wasn't any truck.

The fresh-faced kid who was driving me made comforting sounds through the glass panel of the cab and we went up Brittany at four miles an hour looking for the truck behind bushes. I refused to be comforted.

Brittany bore a little to the east two blocks up and met the next street, Randall Place, in a tongue of land on which there was a white apartment house with its front on Randall Place and its basement garage entrance on Brittany, a storey lower. We were going past that and my driver was telling me the truck couldn't be very far away when I saw it in the garage.

We went around to the front of the apartment house and I got out and went into the lobby.

There was no switchboard. A desk was pushed back against the wall, as if it wasn't used any more. Above it names were on a panel of gilt mail-boxes.

The name that went with Apartment 405 was Joseph Marty. Joe Marty was the name of the man who played with Carmen Dravec until her papa gave him five thousand dollars to go away and play with some other girl. It could be the same Joe Marty.

I went down steps and pushed through a door with a wired glass panel into the dimness of the garage. The man in the very new overalls was stacking boxes in the automatic elevator.

I stood near him and lit a cigarette and watched him.

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He didn't like it, but he didn't say anything. After a while I said, "Watch the weight, buddy. She's only tested for half a ton. Where's it goin'?"

"Marty, four-o-five," he said, and then looked as if he was sorry he had said it.

"Fine," I told him. "It looks like a nice lot of reading."

I went back up the steps and out of the building, got into my cab. We drove back downtown to the building where I have an office. I gave the driver too much money and he gave me a dirty card which I dropped into the brass spittoon beside the elevators.

Dravec was holding up the wall outside the door of my office.

AFTER the rain it was warm and bright but he still had the belted suède raincoat on. It was open down the front, as were his coat, and vest underneath. His tie was under one ear. His face looked like a mask of grey putty with a black stubble on the lower part of it.

He looked awful.

I unlocked the door and patted his shoulder and pushed him in and got him into a chair. He breathed hard but didn't say anything. I got a bottle of rye out of the desk and poured a couple of ponies. He drank both of them without a word. Then he slumped in the chair and blinked his eyes and groaned and took a square white envelope out of an inner pocket. He put it down on the desk top and held his big hairy hand over it.

"Tough about Carl," I said. "I was with M'Gee this morning."

He looked at me emptily. After a little while he said, "Yeah. Carl was a good kid."

I waited looking at the envelope under his hand. He looked down at it.

"I gotta let you see it," he mumbled. He pushed it slowly across the desk and lifted his hand off it as if with the movement he was giving up most everything that made life worth living. Two tears welled up in his eyes and slid down his unshaven cheeks.

I lifted the square envelope and looked at it. It was addressed to him at his house, in neat pen-and-ink printing, and bore a Special Delivery stamp. I opened it and looked at the shiny photograph that was inside.

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Carmen Dravec sat in Steiner's teakwood chair, wearing her jade earrings. Her eyes looked crazier, if anything, than when I had seen them. I looked at the back of the photo, saw that it was blank, and put the thing face down on my desk.

"Tell me about it," I said carefully.

Dravec wiped the tears off his face with his sleeve, put his hands flat on the desk and stared down at the dirty nails. His fingers trembled on the desk.

"A guy called me," he said in a dead voice. "Ten grand for the plate and the prints. The deal's got to be closed tonight." He lifted his eyes slowly, as if they were very heavy. "That ain't all. The guy says I better come through fast, or I'd find my girl in the cooler."

"What does Carmen say?"

He shook his big shaggy head. "I ain't asked her. I ain't got the heart. Poor little girl. No clothes on her . . . No, I ain't got the heart . . . You ain't done nothin' on Steiner yet, I guess."

"I didn't have to," I told him. "Somebody beat me to it."

He stared at me open-mouthed, uncomprehending. It was obvious he knew nothing about the night before.

"Did Carmen go out at all last night?" I asked carelessly.

He was still staring with his mouth open, groping in his mind.

"No. She's sick. She's sick in bed when I get home. She don't go out at all . . . What you mean—about Steiner?"

I reached for the bottle of rye and poured us each a drink. Then I lit my pipe.

"Steiner's dead," I said. "Somebody got tired of his tricks and shot him full of holes. Last night, in the rain."

"Jeeze," he said wonderingly. "You was there?"

I shook my head. "Not me. Carmen was there. She didn't do the shooting, of course."

Dravec's face got red and angry. He balled his fists. His breath made a harsh sound and a pulse beat visibly in the side of his neck.

"That ain't true! She's sick. She don't go out at all. She's sick in bed when I get home!"

"You told me that," I said. "*That's* not true. I brought Carmen home myself. The maid knows, only she's trying to be decent about it. Carmen was at Steiner's house and I was watching outside. A gun went off and someone ran away. I didn't see him. Carmen was too drunk to

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see him. That's why she's sick." His eyes tried to focus on my face, but they were vague and empty, as if the light behind them had died.

He took hold of the arms of the chair. His big knuckles strained and got white.

"She don't tell me," he whispered. "She don't tell me. Me, that would do anything for her." There was no emotion in his voice; just the dead exhaustion of despair. He pushed his chair back a little.

"I go get the dough," he said. "The ten grand. Maybe the guy don't talk."

Then he broke. His big rough head came down on the desk and sobs shook his whole body. I stood up and went around the desk and patted his shoulder, not saying anything.

After a while he lifted his face smeared with tears and grabbed for my hand.

"Jeeze, you're a good guy."

"You don't know the half of it."

I pulled my hand away from him and got a drink into his paw, helped him lift it and down it. Then I took the empty glass out of his hand and put it back on the desk. I sat down again.

"You've got to brace up," I told him grimly. "The law doesn't know about Steiner yet. I brought Carmen home and kept my mouth shut. I wanted to give you and Carmen a break. That puts me in a jam. You've got to do your part."

He nodded slowly, heavily.

"Get the money," I said. "Have it ready for the call. I've got ideas and you may not need it. But it's no time to get foxy . . . Get the money and sit tight and keep your mouth shut. Leave the rest to me. Can you do that?"

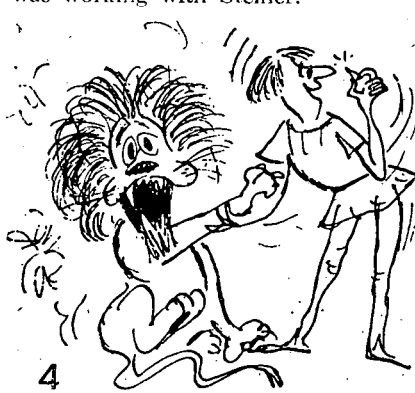
"Yeah," he said. "Jeeze, you're a good guy."

"Don't talk to Carmen," I said. "The less she remembers out of her drunk, the better. This picture—" I touched the back of the photo—"shows somebody was working with Steiner.

"We've got to get him and get him quick—even if it costs ten grand to do it."

He stood up slowly. "That's nothin'. That's just dough. I go get it now. Then I go home. You do it like you want to. Me I, do just like you say." He grabbed for my hand again, shook it and went slowly out of the office. I heard his heavy steps drag down the hall.

I drank a couple of drinks fast and mopped my face.



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I DROVE my Chrysler slowly up La Verne Terrace. Steiner's house looked peaceful under the afternoon sun. The unpainted shingles of the roof were still damp from the rain. The trees on the other side of the street had new leaves on them. There were no cars on the street.

Something moved behind the square growth of box hedge that screened Steiner's front door.

Carmen Dravec, in a green and white checkered coat and no hat, came out through the opening, stopped suddenly, looked at me wild-eyed, as if she hadn't heard the car. She went back quickly behind the hedge. I drove on and parked in front of the empty house.

I got out and walked back. In the sunlight it felt like an exposed and dangerous thing to do.

I went in through the hedge and the girl stood there very straight and silent against the half-open house door. One hand went slowly to her mouth, and her teeth bit at a funny-looking thumb that was like an extra finger. There were deep purple-black smudges under her frightened eyes.

I pushed her back into the house without saying anything, shut the door. We stood looking at each other inside. She dropped her hand slowly and tried to smile. Then all expression went out of her white face and it looked as intelligent as the bottom of a shoe box.

I got gentleness into my voice and said, "Take it easy. I'm pals."

She went and sat down on the yellow cushion in the black chair at Steiner's desk.

The place looked decadent and off-colour by daylight. It still stank of the ether.

Carmen licked the corners of her mouth with the tip of a whitish tongue. Her dark eyes were stupid and stunned rather than scared now. I rolled a cigarette around in my fingers and pushed some books out of the way to sit on the edge of the desk. I lit my cigarette, puffed it slowly for a moment, then asked, "What are you doing here?"

She picked at the material of her coat, didn't answer. I tried again.

"How much do you remember about last night?"

She answered that. "Remember what? I was sick last night—at home." Her voice was a cautious, throaty sound that only just reached my ears.

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"Before that," I said. "Before I brought you home. Here."

A slow flush crept up her throat and her eyes widened. "You—you were the one?"

"Yeah, I was the one. How much of it all stays with you?"

She said, "Are you the police?"

"No, a friend of your father's."

"You're not the police?"

"No."

It finally registered. She let out a long sigh. "What—what do you want?"

"Who killed him?"

Her shoulders jerked in the checkered coat, but nothing changed much in her face. Her eyes slowly got furtive.

"Who—who else knows?"

"About Steiner? I don't know. Not the police, or someone would be here. Maybe Marty."

It was just a stab in the dark, but it got a sudden, sharp cry out of her.

"Marty!"

We were both silent for a minute. I puffed on my cigarette and she chewed on her thumb.

"Don't get clever," I said. "Did Marty kill him?"

Her chin came down an inch. "Yes."

"Why did he do it?"

"I—I don't know," very dully.

"Seen much of him lately?"

Her hands clenched. "Just once or twice."

"Know where he lives?"

"Yes!" She spat it at me.

"What's the matter? I thought you liked Marty."

"I hate him!" she almost yelled.

"Then you'd like him for the spot," I said.

She was blank to that. I had to explain it.

"I mean, are you willing to tell the police it was Marty?"

Sudden panic flamed in her eyes.

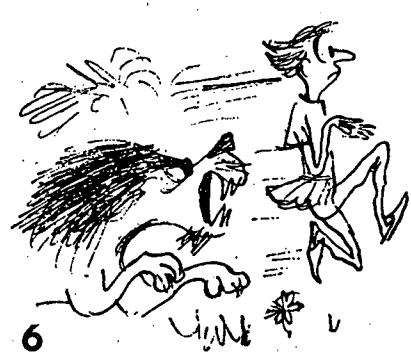
"If I kill the nude photo angle," I said soothingly.

She giggled.

That gave me a nasty feeling. If she had screeched, or turned white, or even keeled over, that would have been fairly natural. But she just giggled. I began to hate the sight of her.

Just looking at her made me feel dopey.

Her giggles went on, ran around the room like rats—gradually got hysterical.



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I got off the desk, took a step towards her, and slapped her face.

"Just like last night," I said.

The giggling stopped at once and the thumb-chewing started again. She still didn't mind my slaps apparently.

"You came here to look for the camera plate—for the birthday-suit photo," I told her.

Her chin went up and down again.

"Too late. I looked for it last night. It was gone then. Probably Marty has it. You're not kidding me about Marty?"

She shook her head vigorously. She got out of the chair slowly. Her eyes were narrow and sloe-black and as shallow as an oyster shell. "I'm going now," she said, as if we had been having a cup of tea.

She went over to the door and was reaching out to open it when a car came up the hill and stopped outside the house. Somebody got out of the car.

She turned and stared at me, horrified.

The door opened casually and a man looked in at us.

He was a hatchet-faced man in a brown suit and a black felt hat. His left sleeve was folded under and pinned to the side of his coat with a big black safety-pin.

He took his hat off, closed the door by pushing it with his shoulder, looked at Carmen with a nice smile. He had close-cropped black hair and a bony skull. He fitted his clothes well. He didn't look tough.

"I'm Guy Slade," he said. "Excuse the casual entrance. The bell didn't work. Is Steiner around?"

He hadn't tried the bell. Carmen looked at him blankly, then at me, then back at Slade. She licked her lips but didn't say anything.

I said, "Steiner isn't here, Mister Slade."

"You friends of his?"

"We just dropped by for a book," I said, and gave him back his smile. "The door was half open. We knocked, then stepped inside. Just like you."

"I see," Slade said thoughtfully. "Very simple."

I didn't say anything. Carmen didn't say anything. She was staring fixedly at his empty sleeve.

"A book, eh?" Slade went on. The way he said it told me things. He knew about Steiner's racket, maybe.

I moved over towards the door. "We'll trot along now," I said carelessly. I took hold of Carmen's arm.

"Any message—if Steiner comes back?" Slade asked softly.

"We won't bother you."

"That's too bad," he said, with too much meaning.

I let go of Carmen's arm and took a slow step away from her. Slade still had his hat in his hand. He didn't move. His deep-set eyes twinkled pleasantly.

I opened the door again.

Slade said, "The girl can go. But I'd like to talk to you a little." I stared at him, trying to look very blank.

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Carmen made a sudden sound at my side and ran out through the door. In a moment I heard her steps going down the hill.

I began to say, "What the hell—"

"Save it," Slade interrupted coldly. "There's something wrong here. I'll just find out what it is."

He began to walk around the room carelessly—too carelessly. He was frowning, not paying much attention to me. That made me thoughtful. I took a quick glance out of the window, but I couldn't see anything but the top of his car above the hedge.

Slade looked at the books on the desk, touched one or two of them, went on around the back of the desk and was in front of the totem pole thing. He stared at that. Then his eyes went down to the floor, to the thin rug that was over the place where Steiner's body had been. Slade moved the rug with his foot and suddenly tensed, staring down.

It was a good act—or else Slade had a nose I could have used in my business. I wasn't sure which—yet, but I was giving it a lot of thought.

He went slowly down to the floor on one knee. The desk partly hid him from me.

I slipped a gun out from under my arm and put both hands behind my body and leaned against the wall.

There was a sharp, swift exclamation, then Slade shot to his feet. His arm flashed up. A long, black Luger slid into it expertly. I didn't move. Slade held the Luger in long, pale fingers, not pointing it at me, not pointing it at anything in particular.

"Blood," he said quietly, grimly, his deep-set eyes black and hard now. "Blood on the floor there, under a rug. A lot of blood."

I grinned at him. "I noticed it," I said. "It's old blood. Dried blood."

Slade's eyes were narrow and as hard as jet. The veneer had flaked off him, leaving a well-dressed hard boy with a Luger. Looking as if he could use it.

"Just who the hell are you?" he growled.

"A shamus. The name doesn't matter. The girl is my client. Steiner's been riding her with some blackmail dirt. We came to talk to him. He wasn't here."

"Just walk in, huh?"

"Correct. So what? Think we gunned Steiner, Mister Slade?"

He smiled slightly, thinly, but said nothing.

"Or do you think Steiner gunned somebody and ran away?" I suggested.

"Steiner didn't gun anybody," Slade said. "Steiner didn't have the guts of a sick cat. I don't get it. I don't get your game."

I grinned again. "Go ahead and call the law. Only you won't like the reaction you'll get."

He thought that over without moving a muscle. His lips went back against his teeth.

"Why not?" he asked finally, in a careful voice.

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I said, " I know you, Mister Slade. You run the Aladdin Club down on the Palisades. Flash gambling. Soft lights and evening clothes and a buffet supper on the side. You know Steiner well enough to walk into his house without knocking. Steiner's racket needed a little protection now and then. You could be that."

Slade's finger tightened on the Luger, then relaxed. His mouth became a hard white grimace.

" Somebody got to Steiner," he said softly, his voice and the expression on his face seeming to belong to two different people. " He didn't show at the store today. He didn't answer his phone. I came up to see about it."

" Glad to hear you didn't gun Steiner yourself," I said.

The Luger swept up again and made a target of my chest. I said, " Put it down, Slade. You don't know enough to pop off yet. Not being bullet-proof is an idea I've had to get used to. Put it down. I'll tell you something—if you don't know it. Somebody moved Steiner's books out of his store today—the books he did his real business with."

Slade put his gun down on the desk. He leaned back and wrestled an amiable expression on to his face.

" I'm listening," he said.

" I think somebody got to Steiner too," I told him. " I think that blood is his blood. The books being moved out from Steiner's store gives a reason for moving his body away from here. Somebody is taking over the racket and doesn't want Steiner found till he's all set. Whoever it was ought to have cleaned up the blood. He didn't."

Slade listened silently. The peaks of his eyebrows made sharp angles against the white skin of his indoor forehead. I went on, " Killing Steiner to grab his racket was a dumb trick, and I'm not sure it happened that way. But I *am* sure that whoever took the books knows about it, and that the blonde down in the store is scared stiff about something."

" Any more? " Slade asked evenly.

" Not right now."

" Now would be better," Slade said. Then he drew his lips back against his teeth and whistled sharply, twice.

I jumped. A car door opened outside. There were steps.

I brought the gun around from behind my body. Slade's face convulsed and his hand snatched for the Luger.

I said, " Don't touch it! "

He came to his feet, rigid. I dodged past him into the hallway and turned as two men came into the room.

One had short red hair, a white, lined face, unsteady eyes. The other was an obvious pug; a good-looking boy except for a flattened nose and one ear as thick as a club steak.

Neither of the newcomers had a gun in sight. They stopped, stared.

In a smooth, low, but very clear voice Slade said, " This hee gunned Steiner, boys. Take him! "

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The redhead took hold of his lower lip with his teeth and snatched for something under his left arm. He didn't get it. I was all set and braced. I shot him through the right shoulder, hating to do it. The gun made a lot of noise in the closed room. It seemed to me that it would be heard all over the city. The redhead went down on the floor and writhed and threshed about as if I had shot him in the belly.

The pug didn't move. He probably knew there wasn't enough speed in his arm. Slade grabbed his Luger up and started to whirl. I took a step and slammed him behind the ear. He sprawled forward over the desk and the Luger shot against a row of books.

Slade didn't hear me say, " I hate to hit a one-armed man from behind, Slade. You made me do it."

The pug grinned at me and said, " O.K., pal. What next? "

" I'd like to get out of here, if I can do it without any more shooting. Or I can stick around for some law. It's all one to me."

He thought it over calmly. " I don't know what it's all about, but I don't give a good —— damn where you go or what you do when you get there. And this ain't my idea of a spot for a lead party. Drift! "

" Wise boy. You've more sense than your boss."

I edged around the desk, edged over towards the open door. The pug turned slowly, facing me, keeping his hands behind his neck. There was a wry but almost good-natured grin on his face.

I skinned through the door and made a fast break through the gap in the hedge and up the hill, half expecting lead to fly after me. None came.

IT was after five when I stopped opposite the apartment house on Randall Place. A few windows were lit up already and radios bleated discordantly on different programmes. I rode the automatic elevator to the fourth floor.

There was a small ivory push-button beside the door marked 405. I pushed it.

After a long time a man opened the door a foot or so. He was a long-legged, thin man with dark brown eyes in a very brown face. Wiry hair grew far back on his head, giving him a great deal of domed brown forehead. His brown eyes probed me impersonally.

I said, " Steiner? "

Nothing in the man's face changed. He brought a cigarette from behind the door and put it slowly between tight brown lips. A puff of smoke came towards me, and behind it words in a cool, unhurried voice, without inflexion.

" You said what? "

" Steiner. The guy that has the books."

The man nodded. He considered my remark without haste. He glanced at the tip of his cigarette, said, " I think I know him. But he doesn't visit here. Who sent you? "

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I smiled. He didn't like that. I said, "You're Marty?"

The brown face got harder. "So what?"

I moved my left foot casually, enough so that he couldn't slam the door.

"You got the books," I said. "I got the sucker list. How's to talk it over?"

Marty didn't shift his eyes from my face. His right hand went behind the panel of the door again, and his shoulder had a look as if he was making motions with a hand. There was a faint sound in the room behind him—very faint.

Then he opened the door wide. "Why not? If you think you've got something," he said coolly.

I went past him into the room. It was a cheerful room, with good furniture and not too much of it. French windows in the end wall looked across a stone porch at the foothills, already getting purple in the dusk. Near the windows a door was shut. Another door in the same wall at the near end of the room had curtains drawn across it.

I sat down on a davenport against the wall in which there were no doors. Marty shut the door and walked sideways to a tall oak writing-desk studded with square nails. A cedarwood cigar box with gilt hinges rested on the lowered leaf of the desk. Marty picked it up without taking his eyes off me, carried it to a low table beside an easy chair. He sat down in the easy chair.

I put my hat beside me and opened the top button of my coat and smiled at Marty.

"Well—I'm listening," he said.

He stubbed his cigarette out, lifted the lid of the cigar box and took out a couple of fat cigars.

"Cigar?" he suggested casually, and tossed one at me.

I reached for it and that made me a sap. Marty dropped the other cigar back into the box and came up very swiftly with a gun.

I looked at the gun politely. It was a black police Colt, a .38. I had no argument against it at the moment.

"Stand up a minute," Marty said. "Come forward just about two yards. You might grab a little air while you're doing that." His voice was elaborately casual.

I was mad inside, but I grinned at him. I said, "You're the second guy I've met today that thinks a gun in the hand means the world by the tail. Put it away, and let's talk."

Marty's eyebrows came together and he pushed his chin forward a little. His brown eyes were vaguely troubled.

We stared at each other. I didn't look at the pointed black slipper that showed under the curtains across the doorway to my left.

Marty said softly, in a lingering voice, "Don't get me wrong. I'm not a tough guy—just careful." He leaned back and crossed his long legs and rested the Colt on his knee. "Don't kid yourself I won't use this, if I have to. What's your story?"

"Tell your friend with the pointed shoes to come on in," I said. "She gets tired holding her breath."

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Without turning his head Marty called out, "Come on in, Agnes."

The curtains over the door swung aside and the green-eyed blonde from Steiner's store joined us in the room. I wasn't very much surprised to see her there. She looked at me bitterly.

"I knew damn well you were trouble," she told me angrily. "I told Joe to watch his step."

"Save it," Marty snapped. "Joe's watchin' his step plenty. Put some light on so I can see to pop this guy, if it works out that way."

The blonde lit a large floor lamp with a square red shade. She sat down under it, in a big velours chair, and held a fixed painful smile on her face. She was scared to the point of exhaustion.

I remembered the cigar I was holding and put it in my mouth. Marty's Colt was very steady on me while I got matches out and lit it.

I puffed, and said through the smoke, "The sucker list I spoke of is in code. So I can't read the names yet, but there's about five hundred of them. You got twelve boxes of books, say three hundred. There'll be that many more out on loan. Say five hundred altogether, just to be conservative. If it's a good active list and you could run it around all the books, that would be a quarter of a million rentals. Put the average rental low—say a dollar. That's too low, but say a dollar. That's a lot of money these days. Enough to spot a guy for."

The blonde yelped sharply, "You're crazy, if you—"

"Shut up!" Marty swore at her.

The blonde subsided and put her head back against the back of her chair. Her face was tortured with strain.

"It's no racket for bums," I went on telling them. "You've got to get confidence and keep it. Personally I think the blackmail angles are a mistake. I'm for shedding all that."

Marty's dark brown stare held coldly on my face. "You're a funny guy," he drawled smoothly. "Who's got this lovely racket?"

"You have," I said. "Almost."

Marty didn't say anything.

"You shot Steiner to get it," I said. "Last night in the rain. It was good shooting weather. The trouble is, he wasn't alone when it happened. Either you didn't see that, or you got scared. You ran out. But you had nerve enough to come back and hide the body somewhere—so you could tidy up on the books before the case broke."

The blonde made one strangled sound and then turned her face and stared at the wall. Her silvered fingernails dug into her palms. Her teeth bit her lip tightly.

Marty didn't bat an eye. He didn't move and the Colt didn't move in his hand. His brown face was as hard as a piece of carved wood. "Boy, you take chances," he said softly, at last. "It's lucky as all hell for you I didn't kill Steiner."

I grinned at him without much cheer.

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"You might step off for it just the same," I said.

Marty's voice was a dry rustle of sound. "Think you've got me framed for it?"

"Positive."

"How come?"

"There's somebody who'll tell it that way."

Marty swore then. "That damned little——!"

I didn't say anything. I let him chew on it. His face cleared slowly, and he put the Colt down on the table, kept his hand near it.

"What's your angle?" he said slowly.

I drew on my cigar and watched his gun hand. "The plate that was in Steiner's camera. All the prints that have been made. Right here and right now. You've got it—because that's the only way you could have known who was there last night."

"You're cold as a night watchman's feet on that one, guy."

I shook my head. "No. You're a sap to stall, Marty. You can be pegged for the kill easy. It's a natural. If the girl has to tell her story, the pictures won't matter. But she don't want to tell it."

"You a shamus?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"How'd you get to me?"

"I was working on Steiner. He's been working on Dravec. Dravec leaks money. You had some of it. I tailed the books here from Steiner's. The rest was easy when I had the girl's story."

Marty sighed. "She hates my guts," he said. "I gave her the push. I got paid to do it, but I'd have done it anyway. She's too screwy for me."

I said, "Get the pictures, Marty."

He stood up slowly, looked down at the Colt, put it in his side pocket. His hand moved slowly up to his breast pocket.

Somebody rang the door buzzer and kept on ringing it.

Marty didn't like that. His lower lip went in under his teeth and his eyebrows drew down at the corners. His whole face got mean.

The buzzer kept on buzzing.

The blonde stood up quickly. Nerve tension made her face ugly.

Watching me, Marty jerked a small drawer open in the tall desk and got a small, white-handled automatic out of it. He held it out to the blonde. She went to him and took it gingerly, not liking it.

"Sit down next to the shamus," he rasped. "Hold the gun on him. If he gets funny, feed him a few."

The blonde sat down on the davenport about three feet from me. She lined the gun on my leg. I didn't like the jerky look in her green eyes.

The door buzzer stopped and somebody started a quick, light, impatient rapping on the panel. Marty went across and opened the door. He slid his right hand into his coat pocket and opened the door with his left hand, threw it open quickly.

Carmen Dravec pushed him back into the room with the muzzle of a small revolver against his brown face.

Marty backed away from her smoothly, lightly. His mouth was

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open and an expression of panic was on his face. He knew Carmen pretty well.

Carmen shut the door, then bored ahead with her little gun. She didn't look at anyone but Marty, didn't seem to see anything but Marty. Her face had a dopey look.

The blonde shivered the full length of her body and swung the white-handled automatic up and towards Carmen. I shot my hand out and grabbed her hand, closed my fingers down over it quickly, thumbed the safety to the on position, and held it there. There was a short tussle, which neither Marty nor Carmen paid any attention to. Then I had the gun.

The blonde breathed deeply and stared at Carmen Dravec. Carmen looked at Marty with doped eyes and said, " I want my pictures."

Marty swallowed and tried to smile at her. He said, " Sure, kid, sure," in a small, flat voice that wasn't like the voice he had used in talking to me.

Carmen looked almost as crazy as she had looked in Steiner's chair. But she had control of her voice and muscles this time. She said, " You shot Steiner."

" Wait a minute, Carmen! " I yelped.

Carmen didn't turn her head. The blonde came to life with a rush, ducked her head at me as if she was going to butt me, and sank her teeth in my right hand, the one that had her gun in it.

I yelped some more. Nobody minded that either.

Marty said, " Listen, kid, I didn't—"

The blonde took her teeth out of my hand and spat my own blood at me. Then she threw herself at my leg and tried to bite that. I cracked her lightly on the head with the barrel of the gun and tried to stand up. She rolled down my legs and wrapped her arms around my ankles. I fell back on the davenport again. The blonde was strong with the madness of fear.

Marty grabbed for Carmen's gun with his left hand, missed. The little revolver made a dull, heavy sound that was not loud. A bullet missed Marty and broke glass in one of the folded-back french windows.

Marty stood perfectly still again. He looked as if all his muscles had gone back on him.

" Duck and knock her off her feet, you damn fool! " I yelled at him.

Then I hit the blonde on the side of the head again, much harder, and she rolled off my feet. I got loose and slid away from her.

Marty and Carmen were still facing each other like a couple of images.

Something very large and heavy hit the outside of the door and the panel split diagonally from top to bottom.

That brought Marty to life. He jerked the Colt out of his pocket and jumped back. I snapped a shot at his right shoulder and missed, not wanting to hurt him much. The heavy thing hit the door again with a crash that seemed to shake the whole building.

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I dropped the little automatic and got my own gun loose as Dravec came in with the smashed door.

He was wild-eyed, raging drunk, berserk. His big arms were flailing. His eyes were glaring and bloodshot.

He hit me very hard on the side of the head without even looking at me. I fell against the wall. I was shaking my head and trying to get level again when Marty began to shoot.

Something lifted the back of Dravec's coat away from his body, as if a slug had gone clean through him. He stumbled, straightened immediately, charged like a bull.

I lined my gun and shot Marty through the body. It shook him, but the Colt in his hand continued to leap and roar. Then Dravec was between us and Carmen was knocked out of the way like a dead leaf and there was nothing more that anybody could do about it.

Marty's bullets couldn't stop Dravec. Nothing could. If he had been dead, he would still have got Marty.

He got him by the throat as Marty threw his empty gun in the big man's face. It bounced off like a rubber ball. Marty yelled shrilly, and Dravec took him by the throat and lifted him clean off his feet.

For an instant Marty's brown hands fought for a hold on the big man's wrists. Something cracked sharply, and Marty's hands fell away limply. There was another, duller crack. Just before Dravec let go of Marty's neck I saw that Marty's face was a purple-black

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colour. I remembered, almost casually, that men whose necks are broken sometimes swallow their tongues before they die.

Then Marty fell down in the corner and Dravec started to back away from him. He backed like a man losing his balance, not able to keep his feet under his centre of gravity. He took four clumsy backward steps like that. Then his big body tipped over backwards and he fell on his back on the floor with his arms flung out wide. His eyes strained upward as if to see through a fog.

Carmen Dravec went down beside him and began to wail like a frightened animal.

There was noise outside in the hall, but nobody showed at the open door. Too much casual lead had been flipped around.

I went to Marty, leaned over him and got my hand into his breast pocket. I got out a thick, square envelope that had something stiff and hard in it. I straightened up with it and turned.

Far off the wail of a siren sounded faintly on the evening air, seemed to be getting louder. A white-faced man peeped cautiously in through the doorway. I knelt down beside Dravec.

He tried to say something, but I couldn't hear the words. Then the strained look went out of his eyes and they were aloof and indifferent, like the eyes of a man looking at something a long way off, across a wide plain.

Carmen said stonily, "He was drunk. He made me tell him where I was going. I didn't know he followed me."

"You wouldn't," I said emptily.

I stood up again and broke the envelope open. There were a few prints in it and a glass negative. I dropped the plate on the floor and ground it to pieces with my heel. I began to tear up the prints and let the pieces flutter down out of my hands.

"They'll print plenty of photos of you now, girlie," I said. "But they won't print this one."

"I didn't know he was following me," she said again, and began to chew on her thumb.

The siren was loud outside the building now. It died to a penetrating drone and then stopped altogether, just about the time I finished tearing up the prints.

I stood still in the middle of the room and wondered why I had taken the trouble. It didn't matter any more now.

LEANING his elbow on the end of the big walnut table in Inspector Isham's office, and holding a burning cigarette idly between his fingers, Guy Slade said, without looking at me, "Thanks for putting me on the pan, shamus. I like to see the boys at Headquarters once in a while." He crinkled the corners of his eyes in an unpleasant smile.

I was sitting at the long side of the table across from Isham. Isham was lanky and grey and wore nose-glasses. He didn't look, act or talk copper. Violets M'Gee and a merry-eyed Irish dick named Grinnell were in chairs against a glass partition wall.

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I said to Slade, " I figured you found that blood a little too soon. I guess I was wrong. My apologies, Mister Slade."

" Yeah. That makes it just like it never happened." He stood up, picked a malacca cane. " That all for me, Inspector? "

" That's all tonight, Slade." Isham's voice was cool, sardonic.

Slade smiled around before he strolled out. The last thing his eyes rested on was probably the back of my neck . . .

Isham said, " I don't have to tell you how a police department looks at that kind of a cover-up on a murder."

I sighed. " Gunfire," I said. " A dead man on the floor. A naked, doped girl in a chair not knowing what had happened. A killer I couldn't have caught and you couldn't have caught—then. Behind all this a poor old roughneck that was breaking his heart trying to do the right thing in a miserable spot. Go ahead—stick it into me. I'm not sorry."

Isham waved all that aside. " Who did kill Steiner? "

" The blonde girl will tell you."

" I want you to tell me."

" If you want me to guess—Dravec's driver, Carl Owen."

Isham didn't look too surprised. Violets M'Gee grunted loudly.

" What makes you think so? " Isham asked.

" I thought for a while it could be Marty, partly because the girl said so. But that doesn't mean anything. She didn't know, and jumped at the chance to stick a knife into Marty. And she's a type that doesn't let loose of an idea very easily. But Marty didn't act like a killer. And a man as cool as Marty wouldn't have run out that way. I hadn't even banged on the door when the killer started to scram.

" Of course I thought of Slade, too. But Slade's not quite the type either. Slade was in with Steiner and keeping tabs on him, but he didn't kill him, didn't have any reason to kill him, and wouldn't have killed him that way, in front of a witness, if he had a reason.

" Carl Owen was in love with the girl once, probably never got over it. He had chances to spy on her, find out where she went and what she did. He lay for Steiner, got in the back way, saw the nude photo stunt and blew his top. He let Steiner have it. Then the panic got him and he just ran."

" Ran all the way to Lido pier, and then off the end of that," Isham said dryly. " Aren't you forgetting that the Owen boy had a sap wound on the side of his head? "

I said, " No. And I'm not forgetting that somehow or other Marty knew what was on that camera plate—or nearly enough to make him go in and get it, then hide a body in Steiner's garage."

Isham said, " Get Agnes Laurel in here, Grinnell."

Grinnell heaved up out of his chair and strolled the length of the office, disappeared through a door.

Violets M'Gee said, " Baby, are you a pal! "

I didn't look at him. Isham pulled the loose skin in front of his Adam's apple and looked down at his fingernails.

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Grinnell came back with the blonde. Her hair was untidy above the collar of her coat. She had taken the jet buttons out of her ears. She looked tired but she didn't look scared any more. She let herself down slowly into a chair, folded her hands with the silvered nails in front of her.

Isham said quietly, " All right, Miss Laurel. We'd like to hear from you now."

The girl looked down at her folded hands and talked without hesitation, in a quiet, even voice.

" I've known Joe Marty about three months. He made friends with me because I was working for Steiner, I guess. I thought it was because he liked me. I told him all I knew about Steiner. He already knew a little. He had been spending money he had got from Carmen Dravec's father, but it was gone and he was down to nickels and dimes, ready for something else. He decided Steiner needed a partner and he was watching him to see if he had any tough friends in the background.

" Last night he was in his car down on the street back of Steiner's house. He heard the shots, saw the kid tear down the steps, jump into a big sedan and take it on the lam. Joe chased him. Halfway to the beach, he caught him and ran him off the road. The kid came up with a gun, but his nerve was bad and Joe sapped him down. While he was out Joe went through him and found out who he was. When he came around Joe played copper and the kid broke and gave him the story. While Joe was wondering what to do about it the kid came to life and knocked him off the car and scrammed again. He drove like a crazy guy and Joe let him go. He went back to Steiner's house. I guess you know the rest. When Joe had the plate developed and saw what he had he went for a quick touch so we could get out of town before the law found Steiner. We were going to take some of Steiner's books and set up shop in another city."

Agnes Laurel stopped talking. Isham tapped with his fingers, said, " Marty told you everything, didn't he? "

" Uh-huh."

" Sure he didn't murder this Carl Owen? "

" I wasn't there. Joe didn't act like he'd killed anybody."

Isham nodded. " That's all for now, Miss Laurel. We'll want all that in writing. We'll have to hold you, of course."

Grinnell took her out. She went out without looking at anyone.

Isham said, " Marty couldn't have known Carl Owen was dead. But he was sure he'd try to hide out. By the time we got to him Marty would have collected from Dravec and moved on. I think the girl's story sounds reasonable."

Nobody said anything. After a moment Isham said to me, " You made one bad mistake. You shouldn't have mentioned Marty to the girl until you were sure he was your man. That got two people killed quite unnecessarily."

I said, " Uh-huh. Maybe I better go back and do it over again."

" Don't get tough."

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" I'm not tough. I was working for Dravec and trying to save him from a little heartbreak. I didn't know the girl was as screwy as all that, or that Dravec would have a brainstorm. I wanted the pictures. I didn't care a lot about trash like Steiner or Joe Marty and his girlfriend, and still don't."

" O.K., O.K.," Isham said impatiently. " I don't need you any more tonight. You'll probably be panned plenty at the inquest."

He stood up and I stood up. He held out his hand. " But that will do you a hell of a lot more good than harm," he added.

I shook hands with him and went out. M'Gee came out after me. We rode down in the elevator together without speaking. When we got outside the building M'Gee went to my Chrysler and got into it. " Got any liquor at your dump? "

" Plenty," I said.

" Let's go get some of it."

I started the car and drove west along First Street, through a long echoing tunnel. When we were out, M'Gee said, " Next time I send you a client I won't expect you to snitch on him boy."

We went on through the quiet evening to the Berglund. I felt tired and old and not much use to anybody.

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Another exciting Chandler —in next month's Argosy on sale May 8

ARGOSY'S SHAKESPEARE PRIZE CROSSWORD COMPETITION

Argosy's Shakespeare Prize Crossword Competition is open to all readers whose entries reach us on or before the closing date, **Monday 11 May.** This month the prize, for the first correct solution to be checked on the closing date, is the **Sheaffer PFM Pen and Ballpen Set** shown overleaf. Entries should be completed in ink. If you do not wish to cut Argosy, copy your solution on to a plain sheet of paper and send it to us, not forgetting to add your name and address in capital letters.

Please post your entry **in a 3d. stamped envelope to:**

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to arrive by **11 May, the closing date.** The name of the winner of the Sheaffer Set and the solution to the crossword will appear in August Argosy, on sale 10 July 1964.

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SHAKESPEARE PRIZE CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Indeed a theatre in the round (5).

4 Warm admirer. Cooling, perhaps (3).

6 Was he operative in putting Othello on the stage ? (5).

9 Katharina—woody sister to Bianca (5).

10 "The —— is delicate" (*Macbeth*) (3).

11 The twelfth or what you will (5).

12 Famous old actor and clubman (7).

13 Banquo thought them a weird lot (7).

14 "She hath such a celerity in ——" (*Anthony and Cleopatra*) (5).

16 Aye, or this (3).

17 "As proper men as ever trod upon —— leather" (*J. Caesar*) (5).

19 Extremist enemies of Fortinbras (5).

21 Anne hath the second-best (3).

23 Flowery heroine (5).

25 Anthony denied he had this gift (7).

27 Fellow playwright or modern sleuth (7).

29 Romeo's citified rival (5).

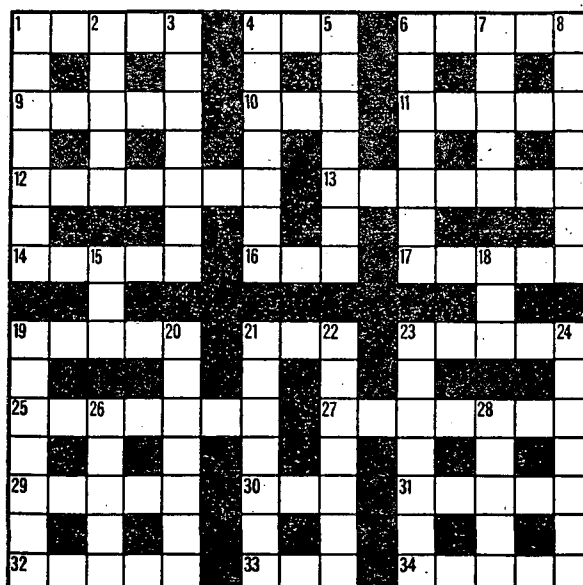
30 "Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ——" (*Romeo and Juliet*) (3).

31 Vaughan exhorts Richard to let his fall (5).

32 "Come unto these yellow——"(*Tempest*)(5).

33 Caesar only wanted this kind of companion (3).

34 "The bawdy wind, that kisses all it ——" (*Othello*) (5).



SPECIAL CROSS-WORD No. 3

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CUT ALONG THE LINE

RULES OF ENTRY ON PAGE 151

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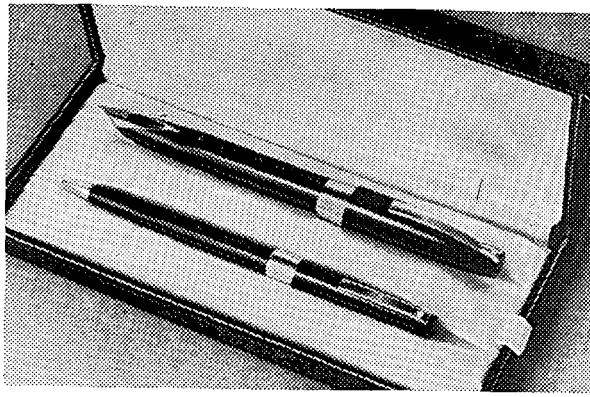
OUR CROSSWORD PRIZE



This month's prize is a Sheaffer PFM pen and ballpen set. The pen, exclusively designed for a man's use, has a Palladium silver nib, and Sheaffer's unique "Snorkel" filling method, plus a gold-filled band and clip: the ballpen has a long-life refill and the special "Safeguard" clip.

DOWN

1 "O sweet Sir John!" a modern playgoer might say (7).

2 Lady Macbeth told her guests not to stand on it (5).

3 The cowslip's would be pearl, said the *M.N.D.* fairy (7).

4 By speaking thus Cordelia became Queen of France (7).

5 Portia's confidante (7).

6 "What shall he have that kill'd the deer?" (7).

7 Change that make-up slightly, knave (5).

8 Disarrange Cestus I for the beats of verse (7).

15 Behead and curtail the poet? That's bad (3).

18 Shakespeare made much of it (3).

19 Come to the actor's rescue—quickly? (7).

20 *Comedy of Errors* involves confusion over these (7).

21 A great poet may wear it, others cook with it (7).

22 Without us, Demetrius shows defect (7).

23 Perhaps he truly did write Shakespeare? (7).

24 So Cleopatra seemed to Enobarbus (7).

26 Biblical villain of *Titus Andronicus* (5).

28 Weight of a feline, an Elizabethan might think? (5).

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